I Hate You The Least

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I Hate You The Least

by MunchieMooz

Summary

It was just another prank - until Pomni ended up in Jax’s room, and somehow, stuck in his head. What starts with bugs in a pillowcase and a few sarcastic jabs spirals into late-night confessions, "deadly" adventures, and a closeness neither of them expected. Jax isn’t used to caring. Pomni isn’t used to being heard.

Now they’re stuck with each other - and maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

That Was Weird

"JAX, WHAT THE HECK!?" Ragatha's voice screamed from down the hall. I'd been waiting for hours for her to find those centipedes all day. I snickered to myself as she started pounding on my door.

"Now, Rags, why do you always insist on blaming me? There are plenty of other people here who might think centipedes would be all snuggly and warm in your pillowcase!"

"OPEN THE DOOR AND GET THEM OUT." She yelled. Hmm... Nah.

"No can do, Ragdoll, seems my legs just aren't working right now! Must be crippling bone-itis! Incurable!" I yelled to her. She just grumbled to herself and stomped away towards the main room of the Circus. Win, Jax.

I stood up from the bed - ah, my bone-itis is cured - and walked to the door, listening for a moment. I didn't hear anyone, which meant it was time to make my cool escape before Rags could come back with reinforcements. Step two of the plan was to remove the centipedes before she got back. Gaslight, gatekeep, Jax boss. Or something.

I threw my door open and turned towards her door, before having the heart attack of my [BEEP]ing life and nearly jumping out of my stupid cartoon skin. "Pomni! Christ!"

Pomni had been leaning against the wall near my door. "Oh god, sorry Jax!" She quickly apologized, looking immediately anxious, as she did.

"...What are you even doing? You spying on me? That's pretty weird, Pomni." I smirked.

"Uh... No."

"Then what? Lonely? Just in desperate need of the company of someone as hilarious and interesting as me?"

Her anxiety quickly shifted to mild annoyance. The Jax special! "Hiding." She said quietly.

My curiosity was piqued. "....Froooom?"

She moved to lean against my door. "If I have to hear about how great a poorly written angsty ninja anime boy is for one more second, I might actually tear off my own ears."

I laughed. "What, you more into the plot-armored, overpowered type? Personally, I can't stand either-" I was cut off by the sound of Ragatha, Gangle and Zooble approaching from around the corner. Pomni looked genuinely terrified. I can respect feeling genuinely terrified at the idea of listening to Gangle's objectively bad anime opinions, so I figured I'd do the girl a solid.

I reached for my doorknob and turned it. My door flew open under the weight of Pomni's lean, and she went tumbling to the floor of my bedroom. Before she could yell at me, I smiled at her, and slammed my door closed with her on the other side.

I went back on my original path towards Ragatha's room, knowing that they'd round the corner any second.

"JAX."

See?

I turned on my heels to face them. "How can I help you, ladies and Zooble?"

Zooble looked as pissed off as they normally did. "Centipedes? Really? Again?"

I gestured towards Ragatha's door. "I was just on my way to be a really good friend and play pest control. I've changed!"

They sighed. "You're such an [BEEP]hole."

"Your words are hurtful, Zoobs."

"Go get the [BEEP]ing centipedes."

I dramatically saluted and walked to her door. The three of them stood outside while I grabbed the couple of bugs and made a swift exit. I hated being in Ragatha's room. It icks me out for reasons I can't explain. "See? I'm the hero."

Ragatha sighed and went back into her room. Zooble rolled her weird eyes and turned to go to their room. Gangle just kind of stood and stared at me for a second.

"Hey... Have you seen Pomni around?" She asked quietly.

"Can't say I have. What, did ya bore her to abstraction?" I turned to walk away from her.

"I...uh..." Gangle fumbled. "Never mind." I could hear her scurry over to her door. Sometimes it paid off to be the unlikable one.

I looked at the centipedes, still crawling around in my hand. I walked over to Kinger's door and let them crawl under it. He didn't spend a lot of time in there anyway, and he actually appreciated my buggy surprises. As I strolled back to my door, hands behind my head, I glanced at Pomni's door.

She was still in my room.

I hated letting people even SEE inside my door, not to mention letting them IN. Why the [BEEP] did I do that? She owes me BIG time.

By the time I reached my room, I had gotten so in my own head about Pomni being in there that I hesitated. What if she was pissed?

Why do I even care?

I slowly opened my door, feeling wildly uneasy about it. But there she was. Sat on the floor, basically exactly where I left her. She quickly looked down upon seeing me, wiping one of her eyes. "...So what'd you do with the bugs?" She asked quietly, still not looking up at me.

My heart sank a little. Did I actually manage to hurt her? I've seen her survive WAY worse falls than that.

"Uhh... I always put them under Kinger's door; he likes 'em." I sat down in front of her, feeling weird towering over her. "You good, Pomni? Couldn't handle a little unexpected gravity?" I leaned closer to her, trying to look at her face.

She pulled her knees in closer to her chest and buried her head into them. "I'm fine." She muttered.

"Look, I'll let you help me hide the bugs next time. But I'll warn you, it's an art form that I do take very seriously."

She let out a tiny, pathetic laugh, and looked up at me. Her eyes were red and she'd clearly been crying since I left. Or, maybe she was before that and I'm comically unobservant? "Art form, huh?" She half smiled.

I was going to take that tiny little smile and run a mile with it. "Absolutely, Pomni. Ya see-" I jumped to my feet and picked her up under my arm like a haphazard little football, and walked over to my bed. She put up a little physical protest, but not nearly as much as I expected. "-If ya put them on TOP of the pillow, they're just going to crawl away, and she's going to miss them entirely. That is no fun. So you gotta hide them in dark places that they'll run out of when disturbed-"

"Pillow case..." Pomni said quietly. She looked up at me as if to see if her answer was right. I felt my cheeks getting hot. What the [BEEP]? I mean, I knew I had a soft spot for the girl, she was easily the coolest person in this stupid Circus besides me, but seeing her look up at me when she was still clearly upset made me want to punch whoever upset her straight in the teeth.

"Yeah! You're a quick learner, I, uh..." I looked away from her and set her down on the edge of the bed. "Pomni, I'm going to ask you something, and the question NEVER leaves this room, got it?"

She looked confused. "Uh... okay?"

"What's wrong?"

Pomni turned cartoonishly red almost immediately. [BEEP], I wasn't trying to embarrass her. "Oh! Nothing, I-"

"Don't lie to me." I didn't actually mean to sound that mean, but I was kind of out of practice at the whole being a friend thing.

"It's stupid."

I smirked at her. "I'm sure it is, and that only makes me want to know more."

She rolled her eyes, and clenched her fists a little. "I just- I listen to everyone else talk and talk about themselves, their problems, but I always get shrugged off or treated like a child when I talk about anything!"

I sat on the ground in front of her. "Disappointed it wasn't stupider, but you have the floor, complain away."

"I HATE being treated like a child. I'm 25 [BEEP]ing years old, not some two-year-old who needs to be spoken softly to every time I'm having a bad [BEEP]ing day!" The tears were clearly welling up again. "You knocking me into your room to hide me from unwanted conversation is the coolest thing anyone's done for me in a while that didn't make me feel like some burden of a kid." She crossed her arms and tried to hide her face from me again as the tears started to roll. "God, sorry, you SO didn't sign up for this..."

"Well, what I'm hearing is that you want me to knock you down more often, and that I can absolutely do."

She laughed. "Please don't."

"No, no! If it's what you really want, I insist! I'll keep you on your back all the time if that's what it takes." That came across way more sexually than I intended while she's crying in my bed in my locked room. Maybe she didn't pick up on it.

She laughed. Like, really, really laughed.

[BEEP].

My face was definitely bright red. "That is not what I meant and you know it." I grabbed her ankle and pulled her off the bed and onto the floor in front of me with a thud. Her little gasp of surprise was cute. I guess. "THAT is what I meant."

"What, you like making girls all weak and defenseless in your bedroom by throwing them around?" She smiled at me.

Oh god, she was beating me at my own game.

"I'm a perfect gentleman in the bedroom, thank you very much."

"I beg to differ." She chuckled.

"I'm wounded by your review, Pomni. Now you're going to ruin my perfect five-star rating."

"Well, maybe don't be so rough next time..." She said quietly, looking dead at me.

Does she even know that she's killing me right now? I doubt it.

"Hey, I was just doing what you asked!"

"We're not at bedroom rough-housing yet, Bud." Her face turned red.

Yet. She said yet.

I held out my truce-making hand to her. "I'll pretend you didn't say it if you forget mine, too." She grabbed my hand and shook.

"Deal."

She really lingered on letting go of my hand. I wasn't really itching to get away either. The contact from someone who presumably didn't want to physically assault me in this moment was... nice.

She finally let go, quickly returning her hands to her lap. "Hey, uh... Thanks."

"For saving you from Gangle, or for the mediocre bedroom experience?"

She smiled, and looked annoyed that she thought my joke was funny. Fair. "Well. Yeah. But... I needed that vent. So. Thanks."

I scooted next to her. "Look, Pomni. You can complain to me all ya want. It's a fun change up from Zooble and Ragatha telling me how terrible of a person I am."

"I mean, you did put bugs in her pillow."

"For the ART, Pomni."

She sat silently for a moment. "You're not a terrible person." She said quietly, "Occasionally annoying? Yeah, but terrible? No." I didn't even know how to respond to that. "Now I'M going to tell YOU something that never leaves this room, okay?"

I nodded. "Go on, then."

"I- and it's totally cool if you don't- consider you my closest friend in the [BEEP]ed up place."

I couldn't even look at her. What a cute thing so say, even if she did just call me annoying. "Yeah, well... I hate you the least, too, Pom."

After a few moments of insufferable silence, I looked down at her. It looked like she'd calmed down, almost seeming... Happy? "It's because I have better taste in anime than Gangle, right?" I asked, nudging her pretty aggressively.

"Yep. That's the only reason. [BEEP] off, otherwise."

I laughed. I don't know why the censors sounded so funny when she set them off, but they did.

I stood up, dramatically dusting myself off with my hands. "So, you gonna stay down there all night?"

She hastily stood up, awkwardly. I'm convinced there wasn't an ounce of grace or poise in this woman. "OH. NO. I. Uh. I'll just. Go. To my room. Really tired!" She ran for the door. "So. I. Uh. Goodnight, Jax. Thanks again." She rambled, opening my door.

"Night, Pom." I waved at her as she shut the door. Why did I wave, was that weird?

I'm so weird.

She was so weird.

That whole interaction was so weird.

Why was that so weird?

Laudanum and Lurky

I spent that entire night replaying that whole interaction with Pomni. I didn't know why I cared. But GOD, did I.

Pomni considered ME her closest friend? Why? How? Do I still get to bully her? I DO love bullying her. But I would fight anyone else who bullied her. Only I get to bully Pomni...

By the time morning came around, I had slept exactly zero hours. Not that I actually need to sleep, but God, do I love sleep. Stupid Pomni. Keeping me awake. Maybe breakfast would help? It's PRIME Gangle torture time. My favorite pastime!

I opened my door and slid out, locking it behind me. The hallway was empty, but I couldn't help but notice the melodic little sound coming from Pomni's door. I couldn't help but sneak my way over to get a better listen. I pressed my ear against her door, hoping she didn't just whip it open at this exact moment.

It was her, just quietly singing to herself. It was weird to hear her sing outside of the context of some cracked-out Caine musical adventure. This wasn't forced. It was genuine. Adorable.

I was trying desperately to decipher what song she was singing. It sounded Disney-ish but it definitely wasn't. Something about... The moon singing? Wine? A line in... French maybe? I had no idea. But it was so pretty in her little voice. I could listen to her all day... If it didn't sound like she was getting closer.

I panicked and silently sprinted back down the hall towards breakfast. Real casual like.

As soon as I heard her door open, I switched to a calm, collected, not at all embarrassed strolling pace.

"Oh, hey Jax!" She chimed from behind me.

A dumb little grin made its way across my face against my will. "Well, goooood morning, Pomni." I turned to face her. "How's gravity been treating' ya?"

She walked quickly to get to where I was standing, in that way that annoyingly polite people cross at a crosswalk. "Haven't fallen yet." A nervous-sounding laugh escaped her as she caught up to me.

"Is that an invitation?"

She looked at me like she was about to flick me in the face. "No."

"Look Pom, I know an invite when I hear one. Watch yourself, Jester." I smirked at her and started walking again.

At least, that was the intention.

She stuck her foot out and tripped me. I caught myself, but I was so caught off-guard I didn't even know how to continue. I felt like I was rebooting until her laugh snapped me out of it. "Have a nice trip?" She snickered.

I just stared at her for a moment. "You just lost leg privileges, Pomni."

"...What does that even mea- AHH, JAX!?" I cut her off by picking her up, flinging her over my shoulder, and heading to breakfast.

"You used your legs for evil. So you lost your right to them." I gave her back a condescending little pat.

"Put me down, [BEEP]hole!!" She yelled as she punched my back. To the untrained ear, she would sound annoyed, but not to me. I could hear her smile. Feel it.

She started kicking her feet, narrowly avoiding kicking me straight in the teeth. "Woah, woah! Watch the money-maker!" I used my other arm to hold her legs down.

She continued pounding her fists against my back. "If that's the money-maker, you should probably pick up a part-time job at Spudsy's! Poverty is rough!"

I had to hold back a laugh. "Watch your face." I let go of her, and her flailing sent her flying over my back.

Thud.

I turned to look at her, now lying on the ground. She was staring at me. "Probably should have told you you have legs again."

She furrowed her eyebrows and held her hand out, indignantly. I rolled my eyes and grabbed it, pulling her up definitely too hard, letting her stumble a little as she got back to her feet. "You're lucky I like ya, Pom."

She brushed non-existent dirt off of her. "Oh, did I actually graduate from least hated to liked?"

I stared at her, feeling that stupid blush creeping up my face. "Shut up."

She mimed zipping her mouth shut and made a dumb little face at me.

I loved seeing this side of her.

By the time we made it to breakfast, I had poked at her and subsequently been slapped at probably close to fifty times. As soon as the others were in view, though, her body language changed. Not as playful. Walls back up. She quietly sat in a chair, and I less than quietly sat in the one next to her, still poking at her.

Zooble was across from Pomni, untouched pancakes in front of them. "Morning, Pomni. Having early morning problems, I see." Their eyes glaring at me.

Pomni shrugged. "He's fine."

Zooble raised an eyebrow. "Is he threatening you? I'm not above hitting him."

I spoke up, "I'd love to see you try, Zoobs."

"No really, he's fine." Pomni said, looking down into her plate of food, fumbling around for her fork.

Zooble looked over at Gangle and sort of shrugged. I swear they could [BEEP] talk me without words.

"GOOD MORNING, MY LITTLE VIBRATING WALRUSES!" Caine's voice thundered from about us.

Pomni very quietly whispered, "...What?"

"It's time for an ADVENTURE!"

Groans from everyone. I hated morning adventures. Like, at least wait until after breakfast, jeez.

Ragatha perked up, always being one to suck up to Caine. "Oooh! What are we doing today?" Her voice sounded like cicadas scratching a chalkboard to me.

Pomni rested her head in her hand, already looking over this entire interaction. See, that's a good reaction.

"Today, you'll be exploring castle Grennendurg, running away from something you know is following you!"

Gangle squeaked, "Uh... running from what...?"

Caine theatrically laughed. "That's the fun! You have no idea!"

"....how is that-" Gangle was cut off by the whiplash-inducing speed we were flung through the portal. "...fun."

Oh. This place was creepy as [BEEP]. We were all dressed like fancy-pants 1800's explorers. Lame. On a table in front of us was a few old oil lanterns, and a note, which was already in Pomni's hand.

She began to read, in a comically irritated tone. "Oops! You were manipulated into helping someone open a portal to another dimension and you're being hunted by something, but you can't remember what! Kill him to gain your freedom." She groaned.

Ragatha hovered over Pomni's shoulder. "What is it, Pomni?"

Pomni pinched the space between her eyes. "It's totally a horror thing, I HATE these."

I aggressively put a hand on her head. "Oh, don't worry, I won't let anything eat you. Unless it looks hungry, in which case it'd be rude to deprive them of a meal."

She picked up a lantern and swung it at me, barely missing. "Easy, Pom! That's vintage!" As we bickered, a low growl, so loud it shook the room, scared the absolute [BEEP] out of her.

Definitely not me, I was totally brave about it.

She stepped closer to me, clutching that lantern like it would save her life if she poorly swung it again. I looked over my shoulder, and everyone was gone. Did they scatter? Or did we miss an entire 'go team' conversation while we were arguing? Who knows. At least I got some alone time with-

Pomni grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me under a desk with her. "Pomni, what the-"

"SHHHH." She clasped her hand around my mouth. Before I could protest, I could see the mangled legs of... something... walking by. Pomni was freaking the [BEEP] out. Just looking at this thing was making her panic. Even I could feel my heart beat faster just looking at this weird guy.

I turned her head away and made sure she couldn't see it. I didn't feel like dying today just because she lost her bananas. As it walked further away, I could see that it was... just a guy. But his bottom jaw had been ripped clean off, and he just looked....wrong. Jesus, Caine.

I saw a book on the ground. I slowly grabbed it, and threw it past Mr. No Face guy. He quickly turned to look at the book, and started walking towards it, away from us. I grabbed Pomni and quietly ran for it through a door, closing it behind us, hoping that guy didn't hear it.

"What the [BEEP]." Pomni whispered. "It wasn't even THAT scary looking, why am I so freaked out?" Still cradled in my arms, not even protesting.

"Oh, so I should invite him back in?"

"[BEEP] off, J-" A loud pound on the door shut her up pretty quickly.

I put Pomni down, and dragged a random barrel in front of the door. Screw you, Stupid Face.

Pomni grabbed my hand and dragged me through another connecting door, again closing it behind us. We listened, and didn't hear the dude trying to tear the door down anymore. Cool.

This room was pitch dark. I felt around for Pomni, and then for the lantern in her hand. I turned the dumb little lantern key, subtly lighting up the room. At least there was oil in it.

Pomni was still shaking so much that I could tell without even touching her.

It looked like a storage room. Or, a glorified closet. I reached for a bottle on a nearby shelf with that subtle 'interactive item' glow. "...What the heck is laudanum?" I asked quietly.

"It's like if you mixed ethanol and morphine." She answered.

"Ooooh so the good [BEEP]. Got it."

She rolled her eyes at me. "It's probably a healing item."

"So, no party time?"

She half smiled. "No."

She grabbed a few other things that were in the room. Oil for the lantern, and something that sort of looked like an old film tube thing for disposable cameras. Apparently, you use 'em to light candles. Weird.

We slowly went through a few more rooms, grabbing random items, lighting a few candles, listening to the horrific growls of the damned, the usual.

"Pomni, what are we even supposed to be doing?"

"Killing a guy, I guess?"

BAM

Pomni nearly fell, she jumped so hard. That weird face guy must have heard us. He was smacking the door behind us so hard I could see the wood bowing. I looked around for somewhere to hide, and of course this was the cheeriest, brightest room we'd found thus far. The only option was going through the next door. I grabbed Pomni's wrist and pulled her through.

There was maybe a foot-long drop into water. Why is there water in this room? Gotta be that ace 1800's plumbing. Really ruined my plan of walking through all silent and sneaky-like, though.

Pomni was frozen. "...Do you hear that...?"

"Hear wha-"

Splashes. Slowly getting louder and louder.

"Jax, there's something in here."

"I don't SEE anythin- AHHG" The splash took a gruesome chunk out of my leg, and of course, this is an adventure where pain is real. Love that for me. I could feel something attacking me, but I couldn't actually see anything. It felt like it had claws, maybe? But it was [BEEP]ing invisible.

Pomni picked up a bone that was floating in the water and chucked it across the room, making a loud splash as it hit the water. I felt the... thing... let go of me and chase after it like a rabid invisible water dog.

She grabbed my hand and dragged me over to a big box that was tall enough to be out of the water a bit, and we both stood on top of it. In fact, there was a whole convenient path of these

boxes to the other side of the room.

Well, that's obvious.

I looked down at Pomni. She was staring at my leg, which was... more messed up than Caine usually lets us get in these adventures. Not what I'd call 'PG'.

"....Does that hurt?" She whispered.

"Not as much as the lost pride."

"Jax..."

"I'll be fiiiiine, Pom." It actually did hurt like a son of a [BEEP]. But she'd freak if I told her that.

I pointed at the next box. "Jump."

"What!?"

"It's jump or get eaten. Leg height on me is face height for you, you wanna get your face bit off?"

"No..."

"Then it's hoppy time!"

She very carefully jumped to the next box. I was able to just do a big step over to it. Thank god, I'd definitely fall in if I had to fully jump right now. And I don't think Pomni could handle watching me get eaten by this thing.

"OH!" Pomni quietly exclaimed, digging around in her silly little explorer bag. She held a bottle out to me. "Party time?"

She handed me the laudanum bottle. "Oh [BEEP] yeah." I took a drink of it, the bottle disappearing after I did. It kind of tasted like how I assumed legitimate poison tasted, but I did immediately feel exactly 25% better. Neat.

She jumped off to the next box, then the next, and the next. I followed a box behind her.

"... Jax?"

"S'up."

"... The door is shut and I don't see how to open it."

Oh good. "Caine always puts some dumb way to open these things..."

"... Like a wheel against the wall with nothing to stand on nearby?"

"Yeah, that sounds about- Oh." Yep. Unsafe wheel. Cool.

I sighed. Alright. Time to be the hero and definitely die so Pomni doesn't have to. She hates dying in these adventures. [BEEP]s her up for days every time it happens.

I picked up a... something gross... that was floating nearby, and threw it to the opposite end of the room. Sir Splashington, that's what I'm calling it now, splish splashed his way over there.

"Get ready to run, and tell everyone how awesome and heroic I was."

"Wait, WHAT?!"

I stepped down into the water and ran over to the wheel, and started spinning it. The [BEEP]hole was coming right for me, but the door in front of Pomni was opening. I shifted my eyes between the splashes and Pomni, making sure she could get out while bracing for impact.

Caine had to have stolen these assets from something; they're way creepier than the stuff he normally comes up with.

I got the wheel as far turned as it could. The door was wide open, and Pomni ran through, splashing as she ran into the next waterlogged room. The invisible thing quickly changed course for her.

Nope. I kicked my foot to make splashes louder than Pomni's little feet could. It turned back for me.

"JAX, WHAT ARE YOU DOING, COME ON!" Pomni screamed from behind the now-closing door.

It got me. It got all the way up to my hip this time. Dumb, invisible claws dug into me. I was so [BEEP]ed.

Brave face, Jax. Traumatized Pomni is less fun Pomni.

"Go kill the guy, Pom! Tell everyone I'm your brave savior-" What felt like teeth dug into my shoulder, and it was the most realistic pain I'd ever felt in the Circus, pretty messed up, Caine. "-or something! I die a hero!"

She went to duck back under the door. "POMNI, JUST GO. DON'T DIE FOR ME."

Please don't watch me die, either, thanks.

She hesitated, but obeyed, going back to the safe side of the door, and I could hear her running off.

As soon as the door closed, the pain grew more and more, until...

YOU ARE DEAD.

Ah, the white room of death, my favorite. At least it was empty. It was always the worst having to be dead with someone you hated.

[BEEP] that water thing.

After what felt like an eternity, I was dumped through a portal back at the Circus, along with everyone else.

Ragatha, Gangle and Kinger were talking about... whether or not they should have... thrown a head in a portal? What? Sounds like I didn't miss much of a conclusion. Pomni inched her way towards me without looking at me. "You would have thrown in the head. It was really chatty." She whispered to me.

"Replaced me that quick, huh? Bet he wasn't as handsome as me." I smirked at her.

"Nope. Definitely not. He looked like... That faceless dude, but... less lumpy?"

I [BEEP]ing blushed. Did she just inadvertently call me handsome?

"And what about YOU, Jax!?" I hadn't even realized Caine had shown up to get his daily review.

"I prefer to see what's eating me, personally."
"Ah! A run-in with Lurky! Sometimes the danger is invisible! Wild!"

...Lurky?

He started grilling Pomni, who was just... kind of word-vomiting at him. I took the opportunity to sneak away. That was a less than ideal death, and I kind of wanted to be alone and existential about it in my room for a little while. I wasn't really feeling dinner, anyway.

I sat in there for an hour or two. Just staring at the ceiling. I was fine, but I think I'd remember getting eaten by 'Lurky' forever. New hate unlocked.

"...Hey, Jax...?" Pomni quietly knocked on my door.

"...Yeah?" I answered back.

"...Can I come in?"

I sat up and shuffled over to the door. "Yeah." I stood aside and let her in. She closed the door behind her and looked down, messing with her gloves a little.

"Before you even ask, I'm fine."

"Are you...?"
"Yeah. I'm good." I sighed. "Are you?"

"OH. I mean. Yeah. The adventure kind of sucked without you. The final boss was just a floating blue mannequin dude."

"What was that I heard about a head?"

She rolled her eyes. "There was this dude who was chained up and basically begged us to chop his head off and bring it with us."

I squinted. "And they just... chopped off his head and brought it with?"

"Kinger didn't even think twice. That mental image is burned into my brain forever."

"AW, I missed Kinger decapitating a guy!?" Who cares about death? This was the real tragedy.

"The guy didn't even die! He just kept talking! The WHOLE time."

"You're right, I would have punted that head into the magical bull[BEEP] portal.

She laughed.

She was really pretty when she laughed...

Wait, what? Did I just think Pomni was pretty?

Yeah. I did.

[BEEP].

Her voice got me out of my own head. "Hey, be honest."

"No."

"Did that actually hurt?"

Yes. "Nah, I'm fine."

"So... yes."

Get out of my head, Pomni!

I just stared at her. "Maybe a little. Laudanum is a hell of a weird drug drink thing."

She smacked my arm. "Tell me when [BEEP] hurts!"

"I didn't want you to freak out on me!"

"And I don't want you to get hurt!" She looked upset. Did I mess something up? "Why did you do that, anyway, big hero man?! We could've just turned around."

I bit my tongue. I'm not trying to argue with her. "Sorry." I muttered.

She looked surprised. "What? No, I just-"

"I didn't want you to have to feel that, okay? It sucked." Yep, real cool, Jax. Just tell her exactly how you feel, maybe give her your Social Security number while you're at it.

She looked at me silently for a second.

"Plus, I got to be the awesome sacrificial main character. That's like the best part of any story, right?"

Pomni quietly moved towards me, and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face into my stomach.

I did not know how to react. Or what to do with my hands. What the [BEEP] do I do with my hands?

She started mumbling, barely intelligible from the fabric of my overalls. "I'm sorry."

"...For?"

"Getting you killed."

I actually think Lurky killed me, she's mistaken.

I slowly lowered myself down to my knees and awkwardly hugged her back. "Don't take credit for my epic death, that's so main character of you." I whispered in her ear.

She gently pulled away from me. "I... uh..."

I stood back up and grabbed her wrist, and dragged her towards the door. "Come on. I'm taking you somewhere."

She didn't argue.

"Okay...?"

Betrayed By A Cool Breeze

"So... Where are we going?" Pomni's voice trailed from behind me.

I prepared my best Caine impression. "One of the wonders of The Amazing Digital Circus!" I looked back at her. "It won't eat you, pinky swear."

I flung open an unmarked door in a random hallway. This door led to a room full of doors. Crazy, I know. I pulled her to one that was about halfway down, on the left, and grandly gestured for her to open it.

"Is it going to punch me?"

"Oh my god, you've found the rooms that just sucker punch you?! Classic. But, no. This is not one of those, though, that would've been WAY funnier."

She reached for the doorknob, taking a breath before opening it. I peeked inside as she slowly pulled the door open. Oh, thank god, I picked the right room.

"Woah..." I watched her guard immediately fall.

Stars. I knew she liked stars.

"These rooms all have old assets from adventures that Caine decided to save. Some of them are stupid, like a few doors down, there's a room that is alarmingly full of weird Caine-brand Furbies. Like HUNDREDS of them. It's horrifying."

She slowly looked up at me. “Why would anyone want that?”

“What, you don’t want a hundred little robot critters giggling in unison at you and screaming to be fed?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I know where all the fun doors are.” More like a decent approximation, but that’s semantics, really.

This room was just a scene of a lake at night. Stars, fireflies, the works. You could even feel a gentle breeze. I thought it was kind of lame the first time I found it, but it seemed like somewhere she'd like.

She walked past me, towards the lake. I trailed behind her.

"Jax... this is so..."

"Pretty?"

Her face turned a little red. "Uh...yeah... really pretty." She sat on the ground by the water, patting the spot next to her. I sat, trying really hard not to just stare at her. She looked so [BEEP]ing pretty. She put these stars to shame. "How did you even find this place?"

I stared off into the water. "It's how I coped when I got here. I couldn't stand the available company for the most part, so I just wanted to learn what weird [BEEP] was around the Circus."

"That's probably better than the panic attacks I had every ten minutes." She smiled.

I pulled on one of the bells on her hat, trying to knock her down. "Yeah, you were pretty pathetic." She pulled on the back of my overalls and snapped them against my back. Ow. Stupid cartoon pants. I pulled harder on her hat, but she retaliated by rolling back and standing up behind me. She pulled on my ears, and when I tried to stand back up, she just clung to my back and kept pulling.

I had to look like a [BEEP]ing dog chasing his tail, trying to get her off my back. Girl had some grip strength, jeez.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow-" I reached behind me and grabbed her leg and tried to pull her off.

I wasn't expecting to bring her here to wrestle. I wasn't really expecting anything. But I extra wasn't expecting this.

I felt her start slipping off of me. Perfect.

Until it wasn't.

Instead of just sliding off like a normal person, she bit my shoulder. Hard.

And I liked it. That's... new.

"Nnn..." The sound escaped my mouth without any input from my brain. The whole interaction caught me so off guard that I lost my footing and fell backwards, landing right on top of her. I just lay there for a second, questioning the last thirty seconds of my life.

"Mmmfff... Jax... Crushing."

I rolled over, lying on my back next to her. "You're not a very good cushion."

"And you're deceptively heavy."

"Are you saying I look fat? Rude, Pom."

"What?! No!"

God, she's cute.

I rolled over to my side, propping my head up in my hand and smirked at her. "I respect your feral fighting style. Didn't take you for a biter..." She turned bright red, and her eyes darted

back up to the stars.

So [BEEP]ing cute.

"Hey... I have sort of a dumb question." She basically squeaked. "If you... Could have something dumb here... Like, just something mundane you miss... What would you choose?"

"That is a dumb question." I took a moment to think. "Want a dumb answer?"

"Shoot."

"Pajamas. Or sweatpants. My options for sleeping are overalls or naked, and as much as I want to get poofed away to an adventure with my dick out? Nah."

Why would I mention my dick in front of her, that's [BEEP]ing weird.

She smiled. "Oh, I hadn't even thought of that, that's an incredible answer. I was going to say like... a working Switch."

"Pom, I was absolutely obliterate you at Mario Kart. It'd be brutal. I'm talking, you're coming in like, 9th place."

She raised an eyebrow. "No way. I'd crush you."

I rolled over to my back. "Maybe Caine would make us a go-kart track so we can see this bet through..."

She giggled. "Heh... Imagine Gangle on a motorcycle."

"HAH. She'd just fly off! Okay, we have to do this. I need to see this, Pom. You gotta back me up on this."

Her hand slowly moved closer to mine, just close enough that her pinky was up against mine. "This doesn't sound like the worst adventure..." Her voice trailed off, like her head was going somewhere else. The feeling of her touching my hand... on purpose... was kind of making me want to burst. But I had to play it cool.

"Getting to watch Gangle probably get hit by a car AND getting to dominate you? Sounds perfect to little old me."

She smiled a little bit, and I felt her hand press a little harder into mine. I closed my eyes and just... grabbed her hand. I couldn't look at her. I couldn't speak. I prepared for her to smack me.

But she didn't. Her fingers wrapped around my hand.

This was it. I was going to die. I did not know how to proceed. I could feel how red my face was. Maybe she didn't notice.

She laughed. I guess she noticed. "Oh my god, are you nervous right now, too?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I've never been embarrassed in my life, and I would never stoop so low."

"Yeah, okay. I totally believe you." She mocked.

"Oh, I'll show you embarrassed..." I jumped up, never letting go of her hand, pulling her to her feet and standing her in front of me. "Dance with me."

She got flustered immediately. Win. "Oh, I am an AWFUL dancer, Jax..."

I smiled smugly. "So am I." I aggressively, and quite badly, spun her in a little circle before pulling her a little closer to me.

She stared up at me. "Jax..." I had no idea how to read her facial expression. "...You're too tall."

"Well, if you're going to be my dance partner, we'll have to figure out the height difference."

She went to take a step back, looking like she was actually going to attempt to dance, but she stepped back just a little too far and her foot landed on the edge of the lake. She started falling back. Usually, I'd laugh, but I'd been so honed in on holding her hand, that I just. Forgot to let go.

We both just plummeted into the lake. Real mood killer.

She popped her head out of the water, struggling to keep it above the surface. "Oh my [BEEP]ing god, I am-", her face slipped back under the water briefly, "-SO sorry."

I just laughed at her. "You can't fucking swim." I was tall enough that my feet comfortably touched the bottom. I grabbed her and sat her on the bank of the lake. "You're 25, how can you not swim?"

She crossed her arms, shrinking into herself. "I can swim well enough to not die, thank you very much."

I pulled myself out of the water and sat next to her. She was clearly freezing. So was I, admittedly. This is what I get for complimenting the nice breeze. I scooted a little closer to her. She did the same.

"Would you be offended if I asked if we could head back...?" She whispered, clearly upset.

I stood up and helped her to her feet. "Oh, you mean where it's warm and where my dry pants are? Sign me up."

"Sorry again..."

"You only get to be sorry if you don't come look through stupid doors with me tomorrow, too."

She smiled. "You have to show me Furby door."

"You're truly a psychopath for wanting that, but I'd still be thrilled to show you that cursed room." I mindlessly grabbed her hand and she didn't pull it away, so I went with it. We held hands as we walked to the door.

The moment we reached the Circus, we let go. It wasn't a discussion; we both just let go as if there was an unspoken agreement, and I walked her to her door. I looked around the halls. No one was around.

I leaned down closer to her. "Pom, for what it's worth, I do actually feel better." I smirked. "Even if you attacked me and tried to drown me."

She smiled.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Pom. G'night."

"Goodnight, Jax..." I heard her door slowly close behind me.

Had I just asked her on a date tomorrow?

I'd have to remember what doors lead to what, [BEEP].

How To Wake a Princess

"GOOD MORNING, MY PRECIOUS LITTLE PORCUPINES!"

I found myself lying in the middle of the floor of the main room, having been freshly torn from my bed by Caine's incessant bull[BEEP]. I sat up and looked around, irritated and sleepy. I'm not a morning guy. Caine was... being Caine. Everyone else was standing around, listening, seemingly ignoring the fact that I was even there.

Except for Pomni.

Pomni was sitting a few feet away from me, rubbing her eyes. Guess she ain't a morning person either.

[BEEP]ing adorable.

I subtly scooted a little closer to her. "Up at 'em, Pomski." I whispered to her.

She raised an eyebrow and whispered back, "Isn't that a dog breed?"

"Aw, don't call yourself a dog. You're more like a hamster."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ever been bit by a hamster?"

I smirked. "Sure have."

Before she could respond, we found ourselves falling into yet another portal. You'd think you'd get used to that. Nope. Ya sure don't.

Looking around, we were in a really ye-olden town with a castle off in the distance. All of the NPCs were basically running around in panicked little circles, but I didn’t see a dragon or anything. Lame.

I looked at all of us. We were all dressed like stupid little knights. Gangle looked ridiculous. I bet Pomni looks just as-

Where the heck was Pomni?

Ragatha's voice distracted me from looking around for her. "Where do you think the princess could have been taken?"

Princess?

Gangle was trying to get the visor of the dumb helmet to stay up. "Is there like... another castle?"

I almost laughed. She was really using Super Mario logic to find some princess I'm just now hearing about.

Zooble looked just as annoyed as I felt. "An island or something...? I don't know. I'm over it."

"What are we even supposed to be doing?" I grumbled, throwing my helmet at a random NPC.

Ragatha turned to look at me. "Well, there was a princess who was kidnapped by an evil prince who was the seventh son of the king, so he was NEVER going to inherit HIS kingdom, to try to force her hand in marriage to take over her kingd- Were you not listening to Caine?"

Nope. Sure wasn't.

"I don't care at all about this princess, I'm hanging around town-"

Kinger, the visor of his helmet down, making it kind of hard to understand him, spoke up. "Where did Pomni go?"

Gangle answered, "She was just with us... Maybe she went off on her own?"

That sounded like her personal hell. She must have gotten pulled away in some crowd of stupid NPCs. "You guys have fun on your princess hunt, I'm going to find a comically oversized mutton leg. Or mead. Or something." I heard Ragatha mumble something I didn't care about as I wandered off into the crowd. It couldn't be that hard to see that little jester hat in a crowd.

After twenty minutes of casual searching, a screaming NPC carrying a bunch of papers bumped into me. I politely threw him into a nearby tree. Jerk.

One of his papers caught my eye. It was a missing poster for that freaking princess. I picked it up, hoping it was just a stupid mannequin in a dress.

'MISSING' Was written in huge letters across the top. With a picture. Of Pomni.

What.

I looked closer. It was definitely [BEEP]ing Pomni. In a giant blue ball gown-type dress.

So that's where she went. She's with some... evil prince? Oh, that sounded like her nightmare.

Fine. Guess I'm looking for the princess after all. Okay. Where would CAINE think an 'evil prince' would take a pretty princess? That could be literally anywhere.

Ugh. Pomni was lucky I wanted to see her in this stupid dress.

As I stood there, racking my brain trying to think of where to even look, an ear-shattering roar shook the ground as a giant dragon flew overhead and off towards the forest. Oh, so there IS a dragon.

I really took a moment to examine my person. Full armor, sans the helmet I ditched, and a sword on my left hip. Nice.

I could slay a dragon. That's a cool way to spend the day. Maybe it had a horde stash with something fun in it. I could use a giant golden crown.

I started heading in the direction the dragon flew. Occasional flaming trees really laid out a really helpful path to a comically ornate-looking, gigantic cave. This is really... dragony.

I walked straight in. Not far past the entrance was a big sandwich board sign with the words 'Ceremony this way!' with a big arrow. Welp. Alright.

"Poooooooomni? Oh Poooooooooooooooomni?" I casually yelled, the echo forcing me to listen to my own stupid voice. Gross.

Instead of hearing her return my call, the cave rumbled. And started getting warm. And bright.

Oh [BEEP].

I hid behind a small bump-out in the hall while a huge wall of fire flew by me. Guess he was an ANGRY dragon.

Great.

Once the fire calmed down, I headed back down the painfully long path. But with a little pep in my step. I wasn't trying to burn to death today. The only thing I could hear was the clanking of this obnoxious armor. I hoped it at least looked cool. A lanky rabbit in armor wasn't MY idea of cool, but maybe the armor helped? I dunno. I don't care.

"STOP!" Pomni's voice cut through the silence like a [BEEP] scalpel. "PLEASE..." She sounded genuinely scared. Desperate.

I ran towards the sound. Screaming Pomni meant it was dragon-killing time. The hall opened up into a massive room. It was very poorly decorated to look like a wedding, but other than that, it looked like your typical dragon lair. Gold piles, various jewels and jewelry. No crown though. Bummer. I picked up a little golden bracelet from the top of the nearest pile and stuffed it in my pocket. Nothing wrong with some light pillaging.

Past the party decorations was a big pit with just a hilarious amount of stairs around the walls of it to get down.

"Pom-?"

A new voice silenced me. A quiet, Australian male voice was speaking. I couldn't make out what he was saying. But Pomni was sobbing so loudly, I could tell he was messing with her.

I slowly peeked over the edge of the pit, trying to not bring attention to myself.

It was [BEEP]ing Gummigoo. Why did it have to be this NPC of ALL NPCs???

I could see Pomni. Her ankles and wrists were shackled to the ground, wearing an enormous wedding dress with thin straps and a veil. It made me feel some kind of way, but I'd shelve

that for later. That feeling was being overshadowed by indescribable, unexplainable rage. Evil-Gummigoo-prince was in her face, saying something to her. A finger underneath one of the straps of the dress.

What the [BEEP], Caine...?

She looked mortified. Rightfully, this was messed up even for Caine.

"HEY, UP HERE YOU GUMMY [BEEP]." I chucked a palm-sized rock at his head, making beautiful, flawless contact.

"Jax...?" I could hear her say quietly through her tears. Oh, this guy was toast.

He turned and smiled at me. "Ah, so the brave knight finally makes his arrival..." His stupid accent was [BEEP]ing me off. "Too bad you're too late..." He smiled at me before dumping a weird bottle of something over Pomni's head. She immediately slumped down to the floor, completely unmoving.

"Pomni?!" Panic took over me instantly. I knew that nothing that happened in an adventure would actually hurt her, but seeing that activated that classic fight-or-flight instinct.

And I was going to fight this stupid gummy crocodile.

Gummigoo laughed. "She's gone, knight... Don't you worry, though... You'll be joining her shortly."

What a cheesy line...

What WASN'T cheesy was watching this gummy crocodile stretch and transform into a giant, gummy dragon. It would've been cool if I weren't absolutely hellbent on slicing him in half.

He wasted zero time flying up and knocking me on my [BEEP], before swooping back down and trying to bite me. I rolled to the left and grabbed my sword. I barely had time to scramble to my feet before having to jump out of the way of his fire breath. Shouldn't that melt him? No? Whatever.

I readied my sword before he could come at me again, swinging his massive tail in my direction. I did the only thing I could think of and stabbed my sword into it, and held on. He flung me around as I held on to that stupid blade. I just had to climb up. Somehow.

The shaking motion was starting to make me insanely nauseous. But barfing on a dragon was not on the agenda. Not today, at least, it could be a cool bucket list item. Eventually, the sword was shaken loose from his tail, sending me barreling towards the dragon's head. He caught my ankle in his teeth. I could work with that, if I ignored the general suckage of the situation. I took the sword and ran it straight through his eye. He opened his mouth and let out a pained roar. I was now dangling from his freshly obtained eyeball sword. I swung myself so I could dig my feet into the sides of his head, ignoring how badly it hurt, and dragged the sword down. It cut through his dumb gummy texture easily, sliding from his eye,

down his cheek, and finally to his neck. I once again braced and pulled the sword horizontally as hard as I could, effectively slicing his stupid gummy throat.

Thank god he was basically a gummy bear and not an actual dragon.

His roar grew quieter as he fell to the ground. I pulled my sword out and tried to avoid getting crushed. That'd be such a lame way to die after that.

He lay there. Completely still. I stabbed a few extra holes in his head, just in case.

Maybe it was a good thing Pomni couldn't watch that, she had a weird thing for that guy.

Oh, [BEEP], "POMNI?" I yelled down at her. Nothing. She didn't budge. She hadn't despawned, so she wasn't dead... Just... unconscious. "POM?"

Nothing. I took a step towards the pit, my freshly chomped foot letting me down as I stumbled.

[BEEP] it.

Instead of limping down the stairs, I sat on the edge, and just jumped down. I wouldn't DIE, it would just really hurt.

And boy, did it. I once again was glad Pomni didn't have to hear the horrific crunch of my bones. There was zero chance I'd be able to stand. My snack-ankle had basically cartoonishly come detached, held on only by whatever weird socks I had on under this armor. The other just felt reeeeeeal broken.

She wasn't far from me, so I shamefully just scooted over to her. "Pom...?"

She looked dead. I knew she wasn't. But she looked dead.

I ripped the armored gloves off. "Pomni...?" I put my hand on her face. It was... cold. "Can you hear me?"

Her cheek was still wet from the cascade of tears she'd cried. I ripped the veil off and pulled her head into my lap. "Pom, I really hate this, and you get to just be unconscious through it, and that's super uncool, so if you could just wake up...?"

Why were tears welling up n my eyes? She was fine. This was fake. Why did I care?

"Pomni, please..."

She didn't move.

Was there some... anti-potion... thing? What would they do in a Disney movie to wake up a sleeping princess?

I froze at my own thought.

No.

No way.

Nope.

Couldn't do that.

She'd hate that.

I sighed.

"Pomni, I'm sorry..." I whispered as I leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"Please wake up... I hate this..." I held her cheeks in my hands.

Her voice was so sudden it almost scared me. "...Jax...? What just hap-"

I couldn't help but smirk. "I slayed a dragon for you, you owe me one sigh stakes rescue." I hoped she couldn't see that I was clearly about to [BEEP]ing cry.

"...is he gone...?"

Her voice crushed my soul. I guess she wouldn't know that the aforementioned slayed dragon WAS Gummigoo.

"Don't worry, wedding's off."

She sat up, seemingly coming to pretty quickly." Where is everyone els- OH MY GOD, JAX." She'd looked down at my legs. "WHAT THE [BEEP] HAPPENED?"

"Slayed a dragon."

"Yeah, I got that, but-"

"Bit one foot off, broke the other." I shrugged. "One of us is dead, and it ain't me."

"Does that...?"

"I'm good, Pom. It was worth it. I killed a dragon."

"Can you even... stand?"

"Mmm. Nope." I held up one of the chains holding her down. "But neither can you! I guess we're stuck h-"

I was cut off by a bright light and a loud, cheering crowd.

[BEEP]ing portals.

Pomni and I were on a stage in front of everyone. In front of the hundreds of cheering mannequin people were the other members of the Circus, all looking varying levels of disheveled. Clearly, they'd just been poofed here, too.

She was standing in front of me, now wearing a different wedding dress. It was less obnoxiously large. Simpler. Something she probably hated like 10% less. A new veil on her head, accompanied by a little golden crown.

I'd have to save this mental image forever.

I was sitting down in what I could only describe as a wooden wheelchair. What a good look for the brave knight. Except, I wasn't dressed as a knight anymore. I was in a fancy-pants white outfit.

Oh. Oh god.

A mannequin wearing a weird hat was standing between us. "NOW PRESENTING... THE QUEEN AND HER BRAVE KING!!"

The crowd cheered. Pomni and I shared a few awkward glances at one another.

I felt on top of my head. Big crown.

Nice.

I smiled at my new apparent 'wife'. "Your highness." I teased. She blushed.

Kinger was cheering loudly with the rest of the crowd. The others were already making their way to a newly opened portal behind them.

Guess the adventure was technically over.

"You know, I'd ask you to dance if I hadn't been maimed in battle. We even practiced."

She leaned closer to me. "Later." Then moved behind my weird wheelchair and started pushing. "I want to go home."

So. Did. I.

I let her push me for a while before I turned around just enough to snatch the crown off her head. She barely flinched; she was getting too used to my bull[BEEP]. I'd have to mix it up.

I was keeping this.

I took mine off and tucked them into my stupid cartoonish pocket as we went through the portal. The wheelchair vanished, and I just smacked into the floor. Without the armor, my legs looked way more messed up, and god, did they hurt.

"Uh... C-Caine?" Pomni stuttered.

"Yes, Pomni!? How can I help you!?"

She gestured at my legs. Caine just snapped, and they were fixed. That was always a weird feeling, going from a ten pain to a zero in an instant.

"You're a peach, there, Caine." I muttered, trying to pull myself off the ground.

"WRONG! But I appreciate your enthusiasm!" He chimed.

In the chaos of Caine, Pomni vanished.

I couldn't help it. I followed her.

As I walked, I heard a faint "Ja-!", before it was abruptly cut off. I wasn't asking questions. Or stopping. Nope.

I reached her room and knocked without thinking. I had no plan. None. Nada.

"Go away." She softly demanded from the other side of the door.

"Poms, you know I have a key."

The few moments of silence were followed by the sound of her door opening.

"Come in." She looked awful.

I slid into her room, and she shut the door.

She was shaking. Eyes red. Tears streaming down her cheeks. "Sorry. I didn't want to get grilled by Ragatha."

I walked over to her bed and invited myself to lie down. "Not your favorite adventure, huh?" She didn't respond. She didn't even move. I sat back up, and she looked downright shellshocked. "Pom?"

No response.

I stood up and grabbed her wrist, pulling her to sit next to me on the bed. "Use your words, Pomni. Give me something, here. I'm awful at this sorta thing."

"No, you aren't..." She whispered.

"Ooooh, so she does remember how to talk! So, talk. What's up?"

She took a really deep breath, and shook her hands anxiously in front of her. "I just... Gummigoo..." I knew this was about that. "He reminded me of someone."

I raised an eyebrow.

"An ex."

Oh. That was a curveball I wasn't prepared for.

"This guy I used to date used to..." She shook her hands harder, like she was trying to shake water off of them. "He..."

"Pomni, you-"

"He didn't treat me well. It felt like being stuck in that situation again. Trapped. Scared of someone you thought you trusted. Alone..."

Even I knew not to make a joke. Even I had a line. Even if I learned there was a guy in the real world I wanted to punt into the sun.

"Just brought up some bad memories... You know?" She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Yeah. I knew that feeling. I knew it so... so well.

"Sorry..." She sniffed.

"No apologizing for crying. Unless you're crying about something stupid. Which THAT? Is not. I'll be sure to tell you if it is, in fact, stupid."

"I'm a mess."

I looked away from her, towards her weirdly empty shelf. "If it's any consolation... you were a really pretty princess. Still are. Even if you're a mess."

Her little sniffs ceased instantaneously. I turned to look at her, and her face was the brightest red I'd ever seen it. Was she even breathing? "What, didn't like a life of royalty?"

She shook her head a little, snapping back to reality. "I mean... I could do without kidnapping. Or the dress. I'm not really a dress girl."

"I could've told you that three seconds in to knowing you."

She smiled the littlest smile before she leaned her body into mine, resting her head on my upper arm. I felt my entire body enter panic mode. "You're really not as bad at cheering people up as you think you are."

I reluctantly leaned my head on hers. "Nah, I'm awful at it. You just have bad taste."

"So..." She started. "How'd you wake me up, anyway?"

"I slapped you until you responded." Good lie. Believable. Totally something I'd do.

"Yeah, uh-huh. Try again."

"Pomni, I will be taking that information to every single grave I ever see."

"That's what I thought." She put her hand on top of mine, and it took all of the power in my body to not pull it away. "Cute."

Good Morning, Pomni

I woke up the next morning feeling strangely well-rested. The bed felt a little cozier. The room, a little... redder. And bluer. And jestery-ier.

The sound of a barely audible little snore crept up from behind me.

Oh god.

I was in Pomni's bed. Under the blanket, just making myself at home. What the [BEEP] happened? What did *I* do???

I turned around slowly, wanting to confirm my fear without waking her up. There she was. Fast asleep next to me, under the same blanket as me, looking the most peaceful I'd ever seen her. Her hair just a little messed up. It was adorable.

She was adorable. [BEEP].

I didn't know what to do. Do I leave? Do I go back to sleep and let her deal with this situation? My instincts told me to book it. But Pomni shifting a little bit scared me to the point of absolute paralysis. When she didn't say anything, I went against my better judgement and laid back down. As awkward as a situation as this was, her bed was *WAY* more comfortable than mine.

Pomni's sleepy little response was to scoot closer to me, resting her head and hand against my chest. It took every ounce of self-control not to grab her by the face and shove her off the bed. She had such a [BEEP]y time yesterday, and she looked really comfortable... The physical contact was unexpectedly nice, even if I thought my heart was beating so hard it might smack her in the face like in an old cartoon.

I didn't know what to do with my free arm. One was tucked safely under the pillow, but the other one? It was a rogue element. I wanted more than anything to wrap it around Pomni... hold her close to me. But I also didn't want her to wake up and think I was an absolute [BEEP]ing creep. She was the one person here who didn't vehemently hate me, and I'd kind of like to keep to that way.

I knew I should push her away. Just like I did everyone else. Being alone was safer. For me. But... I couldn't bring myself to do that to Pomni. The one person who made an effort to actually talk to me and not immediately assume I was just some clueless [BEEP]hole. She's held my hand... and I've thrown her out of a moving truck. So she's either the most genuinely forgiving person in the world, or an idiot. And I was at least 69% sure she wasn't an idiot. Heh.

Pomni started to stir a bit, and I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep as fast as eyelids could close.

I felt her head lift slightly, fully expecting her to scream or jump away from me. But she didn't. She sat up, her body still up against mine. A quiet little yawn escaped her lips.

"Jax...?" She whispered. "I know you're awake." I could hear the little bit of smugness in her sleep-coated voice.

I panicked. "No, you don't. I'm honk-shooing my [BEEP] off right now, Pomni. Just wait, the mi mi mi-s are coming too, I'm SO asleep."

She laughed, still half asleep. "That seems pretty coherent for someone who's sleeping."

"I talk in my sleep."

"Yeah, uh-huh."

"I do! It's happening right now! You're bullying an innocent, sleeping man, Pomni. That's a crime, probably."

She poked my forehead. "Good morning, Jax."

I opened my eyes, only to be greeted by her cute, sleepy little face. "Well, I GUESS good morning to you too, Pom. Now that you've rudely woken me up and all." This WAS a pretty good morning, thus far.

"Sorry for not waking you up, you fell asleep and you looked comfortable, so I just... let you sleep."

"S'fine. I thought I'd lost my mind briefly, but your bed is WAY nicer than mine, so I'll let it slide."

She yawned again, rubbing her eyes. "Next time we have a sleepover, we gotta find popcorn or something." She smiled to herself.

"Oooo, next time? You inviting me into your bed, Poms?"

"Yep."

Oh.

She raised her eyebrow and smiled. "I mean, you slept great too, didn't you?"

"No, it was awful. You're a terrible bed sharer."

"That's a lie and you know it."

"You know nothing of my sleep quality, and frankly, I'm offended you'd assume I wasn't awake and messing with your stuff all night." She smirked at me as she slid off her bed, trying to fix the little messed-up bits of her hair, and doing a pretty terrible job. I rolled over to her and started messing with the bells on her hat. "Ya know, it'd be easier to fix your hair with a mirror. You know what those are, right?"

She giggled nervously. "Haaaah.... Yeah, it probably would be. Does it look that bad?"

I reached up and fixed the piece that was out of place, brushing it to the side of her face. "Not anymore, no thanks to you." My fingers lingered against her cheek for a moment. Even half asleep, she was so pretty.

Oh god, was I staring at her? [BEEP]. I broke the weird tension by tugging on her hat.

She wasted zero time and pulled on my ear.

"AHG... Pomni, I am your GUEST and you treat me like THIS?" "And *I* am your gracious host, you [BEEP]hole!" She half laughs.

We both stopped in our tracks as we heard someone knocking at her door.

Pomni, without moving at all, quietly shouts, "Yeah?"

It was Zooble. "Hey, you coming to breakfast? Bubble made those weird hash browns you like."

"UH..." Pomni turned red and looked at me, without even letting go of my ear. She was just staring at me. I nodded at her, in a very over-exaggerated way. She finally responded to Zooble. "Yeah! I'll be there in a few! Thanks!" She looked insanely embarrassed.

"Cool." I swear I could hear them laugh through the door. "See you in a few." How dare they laugh at Pomni for being awkward.

That was my job.

She looked mortified.

"They're gone, you know. You can breathe again."

"Oh. I. Uh. Yeah. You're right. Sorry." She let go of my ear.

I refused to let go of her hat. "First off, I win. Secondly, why are you apologizing to *me*? Weirdo."

She crossed her arms in front of her. "I don't know."

I sat up on her bed. "Yeah you do, spill it."

She looked wildly nervous. "I mean. I just. Was startled. By Zooble. That's all." What a liar.

I stood up next to her, barely a foot of space between us. She was so tiny. So puntable. I could make a field goal so easily with her. "Well, we goin' to get your hash browns, or what?"

She smiled a little. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

I grabbed her hand and aggressively made her do a little twirl, nearly knocking her over. "Well, let's g-" I paused as I actually took a moment to look around her room. No little trinkets anywhere. It looked mostly uninhabited. What caught my attention, though, was something tall, poorly covered by a blanket. "What's that? Keepin' secrets from me?"

She looked to where I was pointing. "Oh, uh, I dunno... It's always been like that."

"Ooooh, shouldn't have said that, now I gotta peek." I walked over and pulled the blanket off. It was just a full-length mirror. "Oh, see? You DO have a mirror. Now your hair doesn't have to suffer." I dropped the blanket in front of the mirror. "Come on. Potatoes await."

She looked uncomfortable. "Yeah... Let's go eat."

I opened her door for her and gestured for her to go through. She did, and I followed behind her, making sure no one was in the hall before I made myself obvious. I didn't really want to deal with *that* conversation with anyone right now.

I plopped my hand down on top of her head. "What are you doing...?" She asked quietly.

"I dunno. My hand just feels like being here."

"Weirdo."

"Hey, you're the one with the big comfy head, this is your fault!"

Our walk was really quiet and kind of awkward. She was clearly upset about something and I simply didn't have enough people skills to figure out what.

We were greeted with a whole symphony of "Good morning, Pomni"s. It was like I wasn't even standing here. Rude. We sat down in the two empty chairs at the end of the table, our plates already in front of us.

She wasted zero time on eating those hash browns. Which were JUST hash browns. Bubble didn't really understand the concept of side dishes.

Everyone was having a conversation I'd tuned out of entirely. When I saw no one was looking, I slid my extra food onto Pomni's plate. She didn't even look over at me, but she reached for my hand under the table. She didn't grab it, just kind of... rubbed the top of my hand with her thumb. My instinct to pull away, or make fun of her, was overtaken by how much I liked this stupid feeling.

"JAX." Zooble yelled at me. "Are you even listening?"

"Of course I was, I just don't care."

Pomni glanced up at me. "Kinger asked you what your favorite bug was."

I smirked, glancing over at Ragatha. "Centipedes." She rolled her eye, hard.

Kinger absolutely gleamed. "Oh, I love centipedes too! Did you know that centipedes always have an odd number of pairs of legs? Ranging anywhere from fifteen to a hundred and seventy-seven pairs!" I regretfully did actually think that was kind of cool.

Ragatha looks disturbed.

Pomni tried to hide her smile.

I was pretty dang pleased with myself.

After a few more minutes of eating and boring conversation, Pomni lightly kicked my leg under the table. I glanced down at her. She gestured with her head towards the hallway. I smiled, stood up and stretched. "No adventure means it's time for me to hit the ol' dusty trail, ladies and gent. And Zooble." No one really acknowledged me as I walked off. Just like I liked it.

I waited in the hall, just leaning against a wall. It only took Pomni a minute to walk up and grab my wrist, dragging me along behind her with nary a pleasantry. "And where do I have the honor of being dragged, Pomsky?"

She was pulling me towards the doors I'd brought her to the other day. "I gotta see it."

I raised an eyebrow. "See what?"

"The Furby door."

I laughed. "Oh my god. I didn't know you were serious. [BEEP] yeah."

She turned around, and looked at me so seriously. "Jax, it is so important to me to see this room."

I pulled my arm up, taking her with it, letting her just dangle in front of my face. "Let's go see some [BEEP]ing Furbies." I threw her over my shoulder and continued in the direction she was dragging me. She didn't fight back at all. She never fought back the entire walk there.

As I stood in front of the door, I set her down and threw open the door.

Yep, just as horrific as I remembered.

"Oh my [BEEP]ing god..." She muttered to herself.

"Told you."

She walked into the room and I followed behind her, closing the door behind us. The room was basically just shelves, from floor to ceiling, of Furbies. Like an old library. Except instead of books, it was little devil robots.

She walked up to a shelf, and one of the Furbies started yelling about being fed. “Why does this exist?”

“Pom, I don’t even have a good joke to make about it. I have no idea. Normally, these rooms are like... unused assets from adventures, or ones we ask Caine to save. But even my giant, immaculate brain can’t think of why this is here.”

“Your brain is about as immaculate as a Motel 6.” She smirked as more of the Furbies lit up and started yelling.

“Hurtful but true.”

More and more of the Furbies lit up and started yelling.

”Give me a treat!

”Brush me!”

”Playtime for me, big fun!”

Pomni turned to look at me. “This is horrifying, right?”

I nodded. “Yep. Stuff of nightmares.”

She smiled a twisted little smile I’d never seen, but god did I like it. She grabbed one off the shelf and its stupid little robot voice chimed *”Me loOooOve you.”*Pomni, however, did not care about this thing's love. She chucked it full force at another one across the room, causing the one being smacked to fall and let out a digital scream.

She absolutely doubled over laughing.

I picked one up off of a higher shelf. “Weak shot, I bet I can break this little dude into piec-“ I was cut off by deafening silence in the room. All of them just... stopped.

They all turned to look at Pomni, and in sync, go *”Uh-oh...”*Followed by more silence.

Then the lights shut off, leaving the room completely dark. I can barely make out Pomni right in front of me. The one in my hand lights up. *”Mama’s coming.”* It whispered. Totally not creepy at all.

Pomni steps backward, pressing her back into me. “I don’t think I want to meet Mama.” She whispered.

“Oh, I'm sure it’s just a slightly bigger Furb-“

A massive roar came from the other end of the room, shaking the floor beneath us. All of the regular Furbies lit up, giving the room an eerie yellow glow. A glow that revealed an enormous, absolutely disturbing-looking Furby with glowing red eyes.

“You know, Pomni? I’ve never been good at meeting someone’s parents, maybe we should just-“ I chucked the Furby in my hand towards Mama, making her screech. “-go.”

I scooped Pomni up under my arm and quickly walked towards the door, flinging it open and slamming it shut behind us. Mama smacked into the door a couple of times before quieting down and shuffling off.

“Ha-HA! Good luck opening that, Mama. Outdone by opposable thumbs.” I looked down at Pomni, still under my arm. “You should assault weird fuzzy baby demon creatures more often.”

“I knew they were evil...” she said to herself, in a way that felt like she was confirming a theory she’s had her whole life.

I laughed, “You good, killer?”

She looked up at me, not an ounce of fear on her face. “I feel so [BEEP]ing vindicated right now.”

I set her down. “Why did you even want to go if you thought they were evil?! Which they are, don't think for even a second that I’m disagreeing with you. They were objectively evil before I saw... that.”

She shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to throw one.”

“That is the fairest answer I’ve ever heard, and I’ve never felt more understood as a person.”

She laughed. “If Caine ever uses those in an adventure, I’m going hog-wild with the most violent weapon I can find.”

I grabbed her hand obnoxiously and definitely way too tight. “And I will be there, laughing hysterically, the entire time.”

Fashion Bugs

Pomni had been swept up by Ragatha on our way out of the Furby room, for 'girl time' or something else I didn't care about. But now, after hours of some light breaking and entering and subtle pranking, sitting alone in my room felt... weird. All I could think about was her. Wishing I was playing with her dumb hat. Or just looking at her dumb face.

After Ribbit, I promised myself I'd never get close to anyone. Ever again. Losing Ribbit was almost the end of me, and I didn't *ever* want to be in that position again.

But Pomni was different. The idea of not being able to bug her *just* enough to make her smile... kind of drove me insane. I couldn't get her out of my head. I would rather lose her and abstract than never have had her at all.

Ugh. *Feelings*.

At some point, it had started getting dark. Jeez.

As I stared into the blank ceiling, a very loud, unexpected message from Caine popped up, like a big shiny billboard that spoke. *"Good evening, Circus Cats!"* Ugh. *"Thanks to a suggestion for an update, you now have functional WARDROBES! Different outfit options that allow you to really express yourself, while still staying on model! Please check your closets and confirm that the new clothing has been enabled! Enjoy, fashionistas!"*

...Wait, really?

I stood up, and opened my previously empty closet. Sure enough, there was a bunch of drawers that had clothes in them. Huh. I turned around and clicked the stupid 'confirm' button to make the sign go away.

Back to the closet at hand.

It was full of all kinds of stuff. All of the drawers were labeled.

Adventure Costumes.

Hats.

Shirts.

Pants.

My attention was brought to a drawer near the bottom.

Pajamas. Oh my god.

I ripped that drawer open, and it had... unexpectedly normal pajamas. My eyes was drawn to a pair of sweatpants that were the same color as my overalls. Oh *[BEEP]* yeah. I grabbed

them, along with a hoodie that was the same color as my gloves.

Wait... Does this mean... we can actually take our clothes off now? I tested the waters and unclipped one of the straps of my overalls. *Oh my god.*

I tore those off, ignoring the lack of... equipment... that I'd never actually gotten to confirm wasn't there, and put those sweatpants on. It was like heaven. Except heaven is pants.

I threw on the hoodie too. There were even ear holes in the hood. *Nice.* I was even able to take my gloves off. I hadn't seen my hands since the last swim-based adventure.

Now I could lie in my bed and fall into a deep sense of existential dread, but be all cozy about it.

I must've fallen asleep at some point, but now I was being woken up by the betrayal of having giant rabbit ears. I heard something out in the hall. It was the middle of the [BEEP]ing night, who could possibly be awake right now?

I angrily stood up and walked to the door, grabbing my key ring in case someone needed to be unwillingly strangled tonight. As soon as I opened the door, I could tell exactly where it was coming from. Pomni's room.

I walked across the hall to her door and leaned against it to listen. She was coughing.

I knocked, more quietly than I would have at anyone else's door. "Pomni, you choking in there? I'm not even there to watch!" I loudly whispered. I didn't really want to gather a crowd.

She didn't answer. "Pom?" Still nothing. Still coughing.

[BEEP]

I clumsily fumbled for my keys. She could be mad about me breaking in later. "Pom, I'm coming in. Don't hit me. I will hit back." I opened her door. Her lights were still on, but she was lying on her bed sideways, on top of the blankets, asleep. She looked *miserable*. Still coughing. Covered in sweat. Breathing hard.

Sometimes, updates would get one or two of us sick. Something about code errors. But usually not any more than an annoying cold. Not like *this*.

I shut her door and went and sat next to her on her bed. Looked like she had changed into new pajamas, too. She had on a baggy t-shirt that mimicked the colors of her little jumpsuit thing, and shorts with alternating colors. Her hat was off, and it was actually a little jarring to see her without it. Her hair was really, pretty, if not extremely messed up, though. "Poooomni... Can you hear me?" I shook her a little. "Pom? Wake up." Her eyes squinted open a bit.

"...Jax?"

Oh, thank god, she's capable of consciousness. "The one and only." I smiled at her.

She sat up. Kind of. She almost immediately started swaying to the side. I wrapped an arm around her to keep her upright, and she just fell the other way into me, laying her head between my shoulder and chin. "Wha... are you doing in here...?" She didn't even look up at me.

"Your non-stop coughing woke me up from a very nice sleep I was having, thank you so much."

She sloppily put her hand on my leg. "....sorry." She barely whispered.

"Shut up, Pom." I put my other hand on her forehead. Jesus, she had an insane fever. I'd never seen anyone here get this sick, and it was kind of freaking me out. "Hey... you're like... really not okay. Do you want me to find Caine? I'll never sleep if you keep coughing like that."

Her eyes slipped closed. "Just... stay...."

"Pomni, you're actually kind of worr-"

"*...please?*"

I sighed. "Fine. But I'm telling Caine tomorrow." She didn't respond.

I couldn't judge her, I wouldn't want to make Caine save me, either. But man, I kind of wished she was more of a quitter, right now.

I picked her up, cradling her in my arm while I pulled her blanket back. She'd calmed down quite a bit from when I'd first walked in here. She at least didn't look like she was having fever-induced night terrors anymore. I laid her down on one side of her bed and pulled her blanket up. She still looked so uncomfortable. "Hey, Pomni? I'll be back in a sec. Don't freak out while I'm gone." I leaned down and whispered to her.

She grumbled a little bit. "Nooo...." I didn't even realize she was still awake.

"Seriously, Pom. I'll be right back. Don't die on me." She grumbled more, but I don't think she was even lucid enough to know I was there consciously.

I silently slipped out of her door, making sure no one was in the hall before I sped-walked down the hall. There was a kitchen tucked in a random side room near the main room. I actually didn't know if anyone else used it, but I sometimes cooked dumb stuff in there. It was one of my few non-violent hobbies.

I walked in, grabbed a rag out of a drawer, and wet it with cold water. She was going to hate this, but too bad. I wrung it out, and filled a glass with water. If I was playing babysitter, I was at least going to do an adequate job.

I turned back to her room, and walked as quickly as I could without dropping this cup. I didn't really want to explain to anyone what I was doing. I double checked, then slipped back into her room.

She was asleep, and now shaking pretty badly. I was going to be so pissed if I caught this stupid bug. She was lucky I didn't hate her. I flipped her light off and walked over.

I put the water on the end table on the side that she was asleep on. I knew I at least always wanted water when I got update bugs. I moved back to the empty side of the bed and sat next to her.

"Sorry, Poms, this will suck for like, two seconds, but it'll be awesome after that." I folded the wet rag into a rectangle, wrapped my arm around her again, and pressed it against her forehead. She fidgeted and *whimpered* for a second, but quickly settled back down, slumping her head into my chest. "Told ya."

I just let her stay there. I'd rather be here to ignore her request entirely and get Caine if she actually tried to die. Ugh. She *would* be the one to get this sick because of a *fashion* update.

I got as comfortable as I could on top of her blanket. There was something about getting *under* the blanket that made me feel weird. I leaned my head against Pomni's.

She owes me *big*.

"Jax...?"

I woke up more aggressively than I would have preferred. Pomni was still nestled in my arm, but now sitting up a little bit, the rag I'd held against her head all night in her hand. "AHGH. Jeez. Oh. Hey. You're up." I was truly a wordsmith first thing in the morning.

"When did you...?" She still looked pretty rough, but she was at least lucid-seeming now.

I groaned a little and stretched. "It sounded like you were dying, so I broke in to make sure you weren't. You asked me to stay and not tattle to Caine, so I did. You owe me."

She looked confused. "...Is it bad that I don't remember any of that?"

"I mean, yeah. But I wasn't really expecting you to." I sat up with her. "How ya feeling? Still dying?"

She hesitated. "I... uh...-" she turned away from me and coughed so hard I knew it had to hurt her non-existent lungs.

I pulled her back into me, and forced my hand back on her forehead. "Hey-!" She protested.

Still burning up. Great. "Yep. Still dying."

Her body gave up fighting and just leaned into me. "I didn't even know we could get sick here."

I shrugged a little. "It happens with updates sometimes. It'll go away when the update patch comes out, it's usually like, 24 hours."

"So it's a *computer* bug?"

"Basically, yeah."

She looked up at me. "...Is it contagious?"

"Nope." That was an enormous lie, but I didn't want her to make me leave.

"...huh." She grabbed at my hoodie with her ungloved hand. "I like this... It looks good on you." I don't think I'd ever seen her hands before. Not without the gloves. They looked so small, and she had blue nail polish on one hand, and red on the other.

Ugh, why'd she have to be so god[beep] cute. "Yeah, other than killing you, this update kind of rules. But it's weird seeing you without your hat. I don't have dumb little bells to smack around. I like it, though."

Her eyes closed and she snuggled into me. "I'm glad you like it."

I knew my face had to be bright red. She was so affectionate when she was tired. Even more so when she was feverish. I was *not* used to it. It wasn't unwelcome, just... weird. "Thank you for your health sacrifice for my ability to wear sweatpants."

"It was worth it." She sleepily replied, smiling a little. "You look cute."

I look cute?? I was going to scream. But not in an inherently negative way. Just... scream. "Yeah, I know. I'm [BEEP]ing adorable."

...

She was asleep again. I guess I'm a pillow today. There were never adventures between an update and a patch, at least, and I had no idea how to explain both of us being gone all day to everyone, but... I'll worry about that later.

I pulled her in closer to me. This was a pretty okay way to spend a day, even if she would probably be mortified when she started feeling better.

"G'night, part two, Poms."

I Still Won

I spent the rest of the day with Pomni, sans the few times I snuck off to bring her food or an extra blanket from my room. She spent the vast majority of the day asleep, and I spent the majority of the day being a pillow and staring at the ceiling. Ragatha knocked once, but Pomni was awake enough to tell her she was sick, and she left her alone for the rest of the day.

By the next morning, Pomni was pretty much back to normal. Never once did she treat me for being weird for staying with her the whole time, like I was expecting. She actually seemed to be in a really good mood when she woke up.

I'd have to do a few hours worth of stretching after just sitting in her bed all day, but I guess that's not too bad.

She sat next to me at breakfast, unprompted. I could barely look at her without feeling some kind of way. I didn't even know how to describe *what* kind of way, but it made my chest feel weird. She had changed into a pair of pants that sort of looked like her regular ones, but were full-length. And still kind of poofy. She left on the t-shirt she'd slept in, and had put on a split-color beanie instead of her regular hat. I had a feeling this is closer to how she actually dressed. She seemed more comfortable in it.

Ragatha had on a different dress. It looked pretty similar to her regular one, but more... country good-girl. Blech. Zooble had apparently gotten screwed with this update. They just got new parts. Gangle couldn't wear clothes, and Kinger didn't care. I'd put my overalls back on but left them undone, and kept on the hoodie, which had quickly become a prized possession.

I was finally going to start picking at some eggs, when Caine appeared out of thin air. Ugh

"GOOD MORNING, FASHION FUTONS!"

I was convinced he just used a random word generator for these pet names.

Pomni groaned. Same, girl. Same.

"Today's adventure is a doozy of mixing fun and danger!"

I raised my hand, "Does it involve violence or general chaos?" A few angry glances were thrown my way.

Caine laughed. "That depends on you all!" I liked this answer, that meant yes. "Today you'll be partaking in a parkour competition, where the winner will receive a fabulous prize!"

Unexpected, but I liked the competition adventures. I tended to win. I love winning. And parkour, plus stupid rabbit body, felt like it equalled inevitable victory.

Zooble had already wandered off as the portal opened. Disappointing that I wouldn't get to see her try to jump. Everyone else ambled into the portal. I followed behind Pomni, and she seemed not to dread this adventure *as* much as she normally did.

We were greeted by a giant city, with a ton of buildings conveniently close enough to jump between with some skill. Nice. On the opposite side, pretty far off, and on top of the highest building, you could see an obnoxious finish line. Oh, I could get there no problem.

I started walking forward. "Good luck, kids! Try not to plummet to your death!" I waved and ruffled Pomni's head, leaving her hat crooked on her head. Without even thinking, I jumped and climbed up the side of a building, quickly making my way to the top. I turned to look back at all of the less athletically inclined members of the group. Off in the distance, I could see Ragatha, Gangle and Kinger were helping each other climb a *much* shorter building. Ha. Losers.

"Hey, can you move so I don't die?" Pomni's voice came from below me, scaring the absolute [BEEP] out of me. I looked down, and there she was, holding onto the side of the building. Looking mildly irritated.

"CHRIST, Pom! It's rude to sneak up with someone on a roof!" I reached down a hand to her.

She looked at my hand. "Are you going to just drop me into the void?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, probably." She rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand anyway. God, I should just drop her. How dare she not believe my clear threat? But I didn't. I pulled her up, and she barely looked surprised. Rude. "Shouldn't you be taking the easy route with everyone else?"

She brushed off non-existent dirt. "I mean, I've done a little bit of this. Might as well go the fun way." I must have looked visibly surprised. "Some of those abandoned buildings were pretty dilapidated. I had to learn to climb and jump at least a *little*. I can't like, jump wall to wall and dismount with a backflip."

"I could do that."

"I'm suuuuure you could, Jax." She smirked, shouldering me as she walked past me.

"Hey, I'm *so* good at parkour. Just watch." I cracked my knuckles chauvinistically. I ran up and did exactly what she just said she couldn't. A wall-to-wall jump with a mediocre backflip to finish it off on a much higher building. I actually didn't know I could do that, I just committed to the bit.

I looked down at her to gloat, and looking down that far made me really light-headed. Weird, heights normally didn't bug me. Shaking it off, I turned my attention back to the finish line. I *would* be the first to get there. I refused to lose to team weeny-route down there.

Just looking at the next few buildings made me sick to my stomach. *"Are you okay? You look...lighter purple than usual."* Pomni shouted from halfway up the building.

I smiled and waved to her. "Never better, Poms!" I winked at her. "Good luck catching up."

"Jax, wait!" She yelled. I ran towards the next jump, and made it without hesitation. Barely. My knees buckled under me a little bit. I thought nothing of it, and went to the next, then the next. All the while, I could hear Pomni behind me, trying to shout for my attention every chance she could. She sounded fine, so I didn't turn around.

One building left, and it was quite a climb. I was feeling worse by the second. It was so much hotter up here, and I was already exhausted.

One more climb. Easy.

"Jax, would you WAIT?" Pomni had made it to the roof I was standing on. I must have been staring at the finish line longer than I thought. "Jax, you look-" I jumped up and started climbing before she could finish. *"Oh, god [BEEP] it."*

Each handhold felt more and more impossible to grip. But I ignored that and the headache that was rapidly setting in and kept climbing. Flamboyance went out the window, I just wanted to get to the top.

And I did. Before walking over to the finish, I looked down to where everyone else was. They'd barely cleared three buildings. It'd be an hour at least until they got here - slow pokes.

I happily turned on my heels and strutted towards the finish. Except, suddenly, it looked like there were two finish lines. Which one... do I...? I stumbled, the edge of my vision going black.

What... was happening...?

I kept walking. Or so I thought.

"Jax?"

I heard Pomni, but I didn't see her.

"Oh, holy [BEEP], JAX!?

The next thing I heard was artificial cheers and victory music, but that quickly faded. The next few things I heard were all really... disjointed, and didn't make any sense. I couldn't make out voices, just... words.

"Uhh, Caine?!

"Stop trying to hit me, [BEEP]hole. I'm trying to help."

"Jax..."

"Would you please wake up...?"

God, my head hurt. Everything hurt, actually. I forced my eyes open, and I didn't recognize where I was in the slightest. It was dark, but it sort of resembled what I imagine a hospital room in a kids show would look like. Where the [BEEP] was I?

I sat up a little, and how awful I felt was really starting to hit me. I could hear beeping, which sounded like it was ripped straight from some hospital drama, and little, tiny snores. I looked to my side, and next to me... was Pomni, asleep in a chair pulled up next to the bed. She had my hoodie on... cute.

Wait. How'd she get my hoodie? I patted at my chest, and felt... a hospital gown? I guess Caine was really committing to this. Did this mean my butt was hanging out? Great.

I reached over to Pomni, and shook her a little. "Poooooomni... You have explaaaaining to do...." I whispered, not realizing how exhausting speaking would be.

She startled awake. "OH." She yelled, seeming almost excited. "You're up!" She whisper-yelled, clamoring to her feet.

"Unhappily." I muttered. "What the [BEEP] happened?"

She looked down, playing with the too-long-on-her sleeves of my hoodie. "Uh... You passed out. On that roof. And you wouldn't wake up. I tried so hard to wake you up, but you just... wouldn't." Then she looked kind of annoyed. "I told you you looked weird!"

"It's not nice to say someone looks weird, Pom."

She looked angry. "Jax, I'm serio-" she cut herself off, biting her lip. "Why didn't you wait?"

"You seemed fine."

"This isn't about me! I could tell something was off, and you wouldn't [BEEP]ing wait for me! You could've gotten hurt!"

"You can't really get hurt here-"

"YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN." Tears were forming in her eyes. "[BEEP], I'm sorry."

I didn't know how to respond. I didn't know how to comfort her. I still felt like death. And all I could think about was her not crying.

I sighed. "No, don't do that."

She wiped one of her eyes. "What, have feelings?"

"No... don't apologize. I'm the [BEEP]hole, here." I buried my face in my hands. "You know I'm awful at this."

"Are *you* trying to apologize?"

I looked back to her. "Yeah, am I doing okay?"

She laughed. "No, but I'll accept it anyway." She shoved her hand onto my forehead. "Your fever feels a little better, at least."

"*This* is better? Was I literally dying?!"

"You've been unconscious for nearly an entire day, you tell me."

It didn't even register to me that it was nighttime. That adventure started in the morning, too... Jeez.

"I was fine."

She gave me a look. "How long did you feel like you were going to pass out?"

"I didn't!" She raised an eyebrow at me, clearly not believing me. "Not for very long!" Her face didn't change. "Okay, fine, basically as soon as the adventure started."

"YOU DID ALL OF THAT WHILE FEELING FAINT?!"

"Well, it sounds stupid when you put it like that."

She crossed her arms and sat of the side of the bed. "By the way... You lied to me."

"Huh?"

"Gangle told me not to stay here with you, wanna know why?"

"Because she hates me?"

"No. Because she said being sick was *contagious here*."

Oh. [BEEP]. "Ohh.... That's news to me...."

"YOU LIED TO ME!"

Ugh. "Pomni, my choices were lie to you, and stay with you, or tell you the truth and have you kick me out and leave you alone. Believe it or not, I don't *always* just lie for fun."

"But now you're even sicker than I was, and you need a whole different patch... or something. That's what Caine said, at least."

"What can I say, sometimes ya gamble and ya lose."

"I was worried about you, Jax!"

"Like I wasn't worried about you?!" I tried to shout and immediately started coughing so hard it felt like my cartoon lungs were going to fly out of my mouth.

Pomni's eyes softened. "I would've done the same thing..." She reached out and started rubbing my back while I nearly coughed myself to death. "Don't take my mild irritation as being ungrateful..."

I tried to catch my breath. "Where even are we?"

"Apparently, Caine just... has a tiny hospital hidden away that he can poof into existence. I tried to convince him to let you sleep in your room, but he insisted."

I pointed at my hoodie. "Did you strip me, or did he?"

She looked wildly embarrassed. "OH, HIM. Like. With a snap. Not in a weird way. He left your stuff on a table in the corner, and it's kind of freezing in here, so I kinda..."

"Stole it?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry! I can put it back."

"Nah, it's fine. S'cute on ya." It was basically a dress on her, and as much as I loved it, I liked it better on her. "Have you been here all day...?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, I went and got dinner, but I wasn't very hungry, so I wasn't gone long... It felt weird leaving you here by yourself."

I smirked, "Am I good company while I'm unconscious?"

Her face got jokingly serious. "No, not at all. I put a cold rag on your head and you tried to sleep-punch me."

"Did I hit?"

"TWICE."

I laughed, trying to not cough again. "My bad." I was starting to feel a little dizzy. Ugh.

She put her hand on my head again. Her cold hand felt so good, and I couldn't help but nuzzle into it a bit. She smiled. "Lay back down, you're still sick, [BEEP]hole."

Without thinking, I grabbed Pomni's waist with both hands and pulled her towards me as hard as I could, forcing her to lay down next to me in my arms like a stuffed animal. "Mmm, okay. But I was stuck in your bed, so you're stuck with me." I was starting to get so out of it, I didn't even think about the fact that I was basically hugging her in bed.

I deliriously smiled at her, her bright red face staring back at me. 'I...Okay... I'm not going anywhere."

"Good, I don't like when you leave..."

She smiled and snuggled into me. I was too tired to care. It felt so nice to have her there, the others would have to pry her out of my cold, abstracted arms.

"So, did you end up winning?" I whispered to her.

"No, you did. I dragged you over there so you'd still get the prize. You *did* earn it."

I held her tighter and settled my face into her hair. "You're too good for me, kid."

"I'm older than you."

"You're too good for me, grandma."

"Worse."

"Too bad, Shortstack. You get kid or grandma."

"How about Pomni."

"Nah, that's a stupid name, Pom..."

He Has Eyes (Two Of Them, In Fact)

It was almost impressive how awful I felt as I woke up. I looked around, squinting my eyes. Where was I again? This room was unnerving as hell. Ugh. Whatever.

Pomni was gone. In her place on the bed, was a piece of paper. I picked it up.

"In case you wake up, I'll be back soon! (Don't die until I get back) -Pom"

Huh... I'd never actually seen her handwriting before. It suited her. Kinda messy, but... round and bouncy...

As if on queue, she opened the door and backed through it, holding a tray in her hands. "Oh, hey, you're up!" She seemed weirdly smiley. "How ya feelin'?"

"Cold. Everything hurts."

Pomni shrugged a little, still smiling. "Huh. I figured the legendary Jax would *never* be sick for more than a day." She sat on the bed next to me and set the tray down on the table next to her. "I brought you food. Do you need help sitting up?"

"I don't want food..."

"Too bad, you're eating food." She grabbed my hand and put her other hand on my upper back. "Come on."

"Pomni..."

"Don't Pomni me, sit up." She gently helped me sit up.

I groaned. "Can't you just let me die..." I didn't even have the energy to be an [BEEP]hole.

She reached for the tray, "No." And swung back around with it. Eggs, toast, and juice. It actually looked really good... She slid it carefully into my lap. "Humor me. Please?"

I grabbed the fork and shoved some eggs into my mouth. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

"Thank you." She rubbed my back in little circles. It felt amazing... I just sat and ate my food, and she never stopped.

By the time I finished, my head felt so heavy. I was so dizzy. "Oh, [BEEP]. Pomni whispered to herself, quickly grabbing the tray and tossing it onto the table. She sat up on her knees and held me up as I wobbled a bit. "Let's lie down, come on...". She lowered me back down to the pillow.

"Mmm... Pomni? Her face was fuzzy, but I saw her, giving me her full attention. "You don't

hate me?" I whispered.

I heard her make a little sound as she smiled and leaned in closer to me. "Of course not, dumb[BEEP]."

"Why? You should." I had zero control of the words coming out of my mouth. My brain wanted to abort mission, but my mouth was not allowing that.

She put her hand on my cheek, rubbing it with her thumb. "Because I see you. The actual you, not just the Circus you. You frustrate the [BEEP] out of me, but you make me laugh. You help me when I need you. And you're complicated, but that's okay. I like complicated. I like *you*." She leaned in even closer. "And I'm telling you this because no one else is here. No chance of anyone overhearing, and you having to act like you hate that I'm saying this to you because you're ol' hate-able Jax. They're all on an adventure." She kissed my forehead. "You're safe with me, ya know?"

The feeling of her lips on my skin kind of made me want to explode. But like. Explode-positive, not explode-negative.

I grabbed her other hand and laced my fingers with hers. "Pomni, I-"

"GREETINGS, PATIENT JAX AND NURSE POMNI!!"

Pomni jumped so hard that she felt backwards off the side of the bed. "Pom?!" I sat up, way too fast, to make sure she was okay. I immediately felt dizzy and flopped back down.

“GET UP POMNI, I HAVE FANTASTIC NEWS!”

“Ugh... I’m fine.” She grumbled, ignoring Caine entirely.

“The new patch is ready! It should be going through in 3... 2...”

It was insanely jarring feeling how quickly I went from feeling like death to feeling totally normal. Normally he did these updates at like, 3am, so actually *feeling* it was weird.

“...1!”

Pomni’s head popped up from the side of the bed, staring at me like a little wack-a-mole. I gently bonked her head with my fist and sat up, stretching possibly the greatest stretch of my life. “God I love when things keep coming up Jax.”

“So... it worked?” Pomni asked, still sitting on the floor.

Caine chimed in, “Of course it worked! That’s the magic of the Digital Cir-!”

“Can’t you tell by all of this raw masculine energy that I am perfectly fine?” I flexed at her then messed up her hair, and she just smirked and rolled her eyes at me.

“You’re a purple rabbit-“

“RAW. MASCULINE. ENERGY. POMNI!” I smiled at her. “Besides, purple is a very manly color, thank you very much.”

She stood up, took one look at me, and turned around, laughing her absolute [BEEP] off.

What? What’d I-

Oh.

The patch took the hospital gown with it.

Oh.

I’m naked.

“Caine, what the f- oh, he’s... gone.” Swell.

Pomni, still laughing so hard I could see tears in her eyes, walked over to the corner table that my overalls were sitting on. It’d be cute if I wasn’t embarrassed beyond human comprehension.

She tossed them to me. “I guess this is my queue to leave.” She giggled.

“Don’t you dare, we have business to settle.”

“... what kind of business?” She turned a little red, the laughter turning into nervous giggles.

“THIS KIND.” I shouted as I pulled the blanket up and slammed it down over her head, wrapping her in it tightly, carefully shielding my non-existent junk from her view. Sure there was nothing, but that was my *personal* nothing. I’m sure she’d do the same thing.

I threw cocoon-Pomni down on the bed. “If you peek, you’re a pervert.”

“Maybe you’re the pervert for not letting me leave the room!” I could hear her muffled little laugh.

I stepped into my pants. “I dunnnooo, *Nurse Pomni*, you suuuurre were handsy while I was all sick and defenseless.” I teased as I pulled up the straps and clipped them in place.

She popped her head out of the blanket. “Shut up, you liked it.”

“You peeked! Pervert!”

“I heard the buckles snap!”

I pointed at her, acting offended “PERVERT!”

“Jax-“

“What could you possibly want, you *fiend*.”

“I, uh... I’m stuck.”

I just stared at her for a second before I took my turn to laugh at her expense.

“Don’t laugh, help me!” She chuckled a little herself.

“Nah, not until I see you actually try. You’re a strong, independent woman, Pom. Wreck the patriarchy, or something.”

I watched her wiggle around a little bit. “How did you even wrap this so tight!?”

“Raw. Masculine. Energy.”

“Oh my god.”

“God can’t save you now, Pom.”

She was staring daggers at me. “Jax.”

I threw my hands up in surrender. “Okaaaay, okaaay, fine.” I walked over to her, grabbed the end of the blanket and quickly lifted it up, spinning her comically quickly out of the blanket and back onto the bed.

When her eyes stopped literally spinning, she lunged up, trying to grab my suspended straps. “YOU-“

I, in return, grabbed her wrists and slammed them back down in the bed. “It’s cute that you think you can out-roughhouse me, Po-“ My thought was completely cut off when I really looked at her face.

She was the brightest red I’d ever seen her. Eyes wide, pupils tiny. She didn’t look *scared* , but she certainly looked...

“...Uh... Jax...?"

Oh. Oh [BEEP]. [BEEP]. What do I do? How do I get out of this? I didn't mean to ACTUALLY be a pervert! What if she thinks I'm actually a pervert!?

"Now look who's being the perv..." She whispered, smiling a little.

GOD [BEEP] IT.

"NO. This is me, winning the fight."

"Oh yeah?" She smirked. "What do you win?"

I let go of her wrists, throwing my hands up. "The satisfaction of victory."

"Yeah, uh-huh." She sat up and hopped off the bed, standing right in front of me. "I meant what I said, Jax." She smirked. "Pervert or not."

I ruffled her hair until it roughly resembled a birds nest. "I know, Poms."

Not long after we had left the room, everyone returned from the day's adventure. It sounded like a *real* drag, too. From what I could gather, it was just a big maze, with little to no other elements at all. *Boring.*

Pomni had been stolen to help Ragatha with... some sewing thing? I dunno. Pom was *so* bad at saying no to stuff she didn't actually want to do, and *all I wanted* was to be spending more time with her.

Ugh.

Gangle and Zooble headed off towards the bedrooms, too. I was convinced they had a *thing*. I just didn't know how *intense* of a thing.

Kinger had scuttled into his pillow fort. God, I desperately needed to talk to someone about whatever thing I have going on with Pomni, and he sounded... the least awful? At least he'd probably forget immediately.

I waltzed over to his fort. "Uh... Hey, Kinger?

No answer. "Ki-"

He popped out. "Oh, hello, Jax!"

I looked around. All clear. "Can I... Come in?"

...

"Oh, hello, Jax! Would you like to come in?"

I sighed. "Yeah, buddy. Thanks." I crawled in and sat on the ground. I don't actually think I'd ever been in here before. It was... weirdly cozy, considering it was a pillow fort for a 40-something-year-old man.

"How can I help you, Jax?" Kinger sat down in front of me. It was always weird watching him switch between being *Kinger* and being... Kinger.

"I need..." I groaned. "No, I don't *need* anything. I have a question, though."

"Go on."

Was it too late to back out of this? I hated this. You know what, no. I need someone to tell me I'm an idiot. "So, someone makes me feel... crazy. But like. Not in a bad way. She makes me feel physically ill, but I also always want her around and I hate when she isn't."

"So, you have romantic feelings for this person?"

"I..." I had never actually put those words to it before. "Maybe? How do you even know that?"

Kinger laughed. "Romance is a strange thing, Jax. It begins with genuinely enjoying a person's company. Then, you begin to crave that company. Your world just feels... more complete with them in it. Things you once despised seem enjoyable when you see them through their eyes. Their touch brings you comfort you never knew possible..." He looked off into the distance, as if remembering an old memory. "Love is incredible."

I sat in silence for a moment. *[BEEP]*...

"It's okay to be afraid of the feeling, Jax. While beautiful, love is *terrifying*. Letting someone that close to your heart is difficult. But the reward is... immeasurable."

"How do I even know if she feels the same way!? I don't want to make an [BEEP] of myself." At least, not any more than I already have...

"Pomni has feelings for you, too. Trust me."

Her name caught me off guard. "How the [BEEP] do you know I'm even talking about Pomni!?"

"I have eyes. Two of them, in fact."

"What does that even mean?!"

"You don't see her when you aren't looking at her." That is an absolutely insane thing to say, but he wasn't *wrong*... What was she doing when I wasn't looking?!

"I... uh... Thanks, I guess, Kinger." I scrambled up to leave. If I had to partake in this interaction one moment longer, I might have to set a fire just to calm down. I opened his little pillow door.

"Oh, hello, Jax!"

"Bye, Kinger." I closed the door behind me and sped off towards my room. Now I'm even more confused. There was zero chance she felt the same way. Did I even feel *that way* about her?!

I was paying zero attention to where I was going while dealing with the war in my head, and I slammed into something. I hoped no one saw that...

"Ow..."

Her little voice quickly raised the white flag in my brain. Oh, [BEEP], it was Pomni who I'd just unceremoniously bowled into the ground.

"Where are *you* off to in such a hurry?"

I didn't think. I couldn't. I just picked her up and threw her over my shoulder and headed off to the room of too many doors. "Doesn't matter now."

"GAH- You know, you can just be like, 'Hey, Pomni, come with me to this place!' and I'd come with you, right?"

"Yeah, but this is more fun."

I carried her to a new door. One I'd been saving for a day I made her mad or something. I threw open the door and dropped her to her feet inside.

It was a tropical island that was perpetually stuck at sunset, right on the beach. It was covered in flowers and it just... reminded me of her.

"Woah..." She looked up at me. "This is beautiful..."

"I... need to talk to you. In private. And what's more private than a remote island?" I couldn't stop staring at her hands. Or, at least, where they *would* be. She still hadn't taken off my hoodie, and the sleeves were *way* too long.

"Well, you have my attention. What's up?"

I grabbed her hand and dragged her over to the beach, pulling her down with me as I sat on the sand. "Pomni..." She looked up at me, listening attentively. The golden light of the sun made her even more beautiful... I really thought I'd have more time to prepare for this conversation. "Pomni, I am so bad at this."

She laughed. "Bad at what?"

"Just like... talking about stuff... and stuff."

"Oh, you're *great* at talking. You do it *so much.*" She smiled. "Just... say what's in your brain and I'll figure it out.

"What if..." I swallowed hard and pulled her closer to me. "What if I just... show you?"

She looked surprised. "Okay. Show me..."

I took her words as permission and pulled her into me, probably rougher than I intended, and leaned in to kiss her-

But I [BEEP]ing froze right before I reached her lips. God [BEEP] it. [BEEP]. I was [BEEP]ing this up. *So* badly. But Pomni did the absolute last thing I expected. She closed the gap. *She* kissed *me*.

Her lips were *so* sweet. I could feel the addiction forming in my digital veins already. I had no idea what to do with my hands. What the [BEEP] do I do with my hands?! We stayed there, locked in that kiss, for what felt like both three seconds and also three lifetimes.

As I slowly pulled away, I kissed her cheek, prolonging the time before I had to make eye contact with her again.

As her face came back into view, I couldn't tear my eyes away from her mouth. "So... what did you want to talk about...?" The corners of her mouth slowly curling into a sweet little smile.

"That. God, that."

She laughed. "Well, I'm all ears."

"You're like, 0% ears."

"You know what I mean, smart[BEEP]."

I grabbed her hand and pulled it to my chest, holding it there defensively. "You know what you said to me while I was on my soap opera deathbed?" She nodded. "Well... ditto."

She blushed and laughed.

"Don't laugh, I *told* you I'm bad at this!"

"Then practice."

I sighed. "God [BEEP] you, fine." I plopped my cheek on top of her head. "I like your goofy [BEEP], okay? You make my chest feel weird, and I... *miss you* when you're not around, and you make me feel... You make me feel like I might still be [BEEP]ing human..."

Pomni was quiet for a moment before she shoved me over, leaned over my side, and kissed me again. My heart and stomach felt like I was hiding a million bugs in them. Is this what people meant by getting butterflies?

"See?" She smiled. "You're not bad at it."

I felt like my face was going to burst into flames. "Yeah, well..." I grabbed her and pulled her on top of me, holding her tightly in my arms and obnoxiously peppering her face with kisses. "Maybe I want to be better than 'not bad' for you."

Everything

What are we?

I couldn't get the question out of my head. Were we just two people who wanted to kiss? Or was it... more than that. We hadn't talked about it, but she wasn't acting weird at all. Other than making what seemed to be an active decision to be near me.

Pomni had chosen to sit right next to me on the couch, her thigh right up against me, even though there were tons of other places to sit in here. *Not that I was complaining,* but it was taking every ounce of restraint I had to not wrap my arm around her. I just wanted to touch her and kiss her and be all gross and stuff, but everyone else was in the room. She had never made it clear how she felt about public displays of affection, but she wasn't a particularly touchy-feely person, typically, so I was operating under the assumption that it was off the table.

But GOD did her hand look so [BEEP]ing holdable right now.

I felt a little nudge at my side. Pomni wasn't looking at me, but was instead locked into listening to Gangle, who was pretty much the sole participant in the conversation.

"I wish Caine would send us on an adventure where we got like, cool superpowers or something. But *unique* superpowers, you know? Like having explosive sweat, or being able to make stuff float, or being able to talk to bugs or-"

Pomni was just slowly smiling and nodding, then proceeded to kick my leg.

I leaned forward and looked at Gangle. "What, you want to eat some dudes hair and get real strong with some serious main character privileges? Pass. Although the idea of getting to blow you up *does* sound pretty appealing."

"Who's to say you get the explosion power?!" Gangle squeaked.

I shrugged. "Common sense, really." I gently shoved Pomni over. "You'd probably get some weird power, like offensive juggling, or being *really* stretchy and flexible." I smirked at her and did a stupid little eyebrow wiggle. She smiled through her subtle blush, and pushed my face away from her with the palm of her hand.

"Yeah, probably, but I could offensively juggle you *into the void*." Pomni challenged.

"OH. No way. I could take your super-jester [BEEP] *down* with just one hand."

"I'd like to see you try." She laughed.

Gangle looked wildly uncomfortable, burying her face into her sketchbook. *Good. Draw your weird fan art.*

"GOOD AFTERNOON, MY ACTIVE ARTICHOKES!"

I could see the dread wash over Pomni's face. She slowly pulled the hood of my hoodie up over her head and pulled the strings.

"Get ready to complete your objectives, and be careful! Or face *the goose!*"

The *what?* Pomni looked equally as confused as I was before we were dumped through a portal.

We were all, sans Zooble, *of course*, standing in what almost looked like a prison. Lots of "guards" around, a bunch of weird, culty posters lining nearly every wall.

Pomni's shoulders slouched as she looked around. She had a silly-looking pair of night vision goggles on her forehead; they looked hilarious and I *hoped* she'd put them on at some point. "What in the MK Ultra is *this*..." She muttered.

I leaned down to her. "Snake. Lamb. Artichoke..." I whispered.

"*What?*" She half laughed.

"I'm trying to find your MK Ultra wake word. Do you feel a deep desire to kill?"

She rolled her eyes. "Now that you mention it..."

A loud beeping came over the intercom. *"Your trial is prepared, please enter the shuttle."*

Everyone started walking towards the ominous glowing green door we were clearly being directed to. No one other than me or Pomni seemed that skeeved out by this place. "Uuuuuggggh...." I grumbled as I walked over. "This is going to be duuuumb."

In the shuttle, we were instructed to sit in these chairs that had little TVs above them. Cool, hate that.

We each sat down, Pomni sitting to my right, and the TVs swiveled down in front of our faces. The screens whispering about following orders, cleansing, and showing off some real weird imagery of a puppet goose.

The TVs moved back up, and the shuttle came to a halt.

"Well, that was a fun little movie!" Kinger chimed.

Ragatha nervously laughed. "Yeah, super... fun!"

We all stepped off the shuttle, and Pomni stayed close to me. Even *I* was really unnerved, I couldn't imagine what was going through her big ol' head. In front of us, was what looked like a weird mix of a church and a school, but dark, and with broken windows.

The first "objective" popped up above our heads. "Infiltrate the school". Okay, that's easy enough. Ragatha, Kinger and Gangle headed off directly towards the front door. Gangle

almost immediately stepped on a big pile of broken glass, and the sound was deafening compared to the eerie silence.

I looked around, and off to the side was a little side route. I headed that way, grabbing Pomni's hand behind me. "I feel like the straightforward route is probably-" I was cut off by some *very* large-sounding footsteps that were going for Gangle. I dragged Pomni towards the door to the side route a *little* faster.

"What the [BEEP] was *THAT*?!" Pomni loudly whispered as I opened the door.

"I dunno, wanna find out? Maybe he's friendly."

"No. No, I do not."

"Well, that's no way to make new friends, Pom."

She looked so nervous, and I didn't blame her. She *did* have to listen to me die last time we had a horror adventure.

I held her hand the entire time we made our way to the main building, holding her close to me and being admittedly more vigilant than I usually was on these adventures. I had to keep both of us alive. No traumatizing Pomni, today, *Caine*.

As the others came into view, already looking worse for wear, Pomni squeezed my hand before letting it go.

"Objective updated: Tune the radios 0/3"

What?

Ragatha's irritatingly chipper voice spoke up, "Look! There's a map that says where they all are!" She *was* right, though. The map said there was one in the boys' dorm, one in the girls' dorm, and one in the infant dorm.

I rubbed my hands together. "Alright, *gang*, split up, me and Pomni got the infant dorm. I don't care how you split up the other two. Good luck. Go team." Before anyone could protest, I headed up the stairs, making sure Pomni was close behind me, and followed the signs to the infant dorm.

"Why'd you pick infants...?" She asked.

"Well, if there's some creepy enemies or something, I figure evil babies would be easier to fight off than evil ten-year-olds."

Pomni laughed a little. "Just out here, punting evil babies..."

"I could get a field goal with a little demon baby. Easy." I mimed kicking a football-demon-baby, getting a genuine laugh out of her.

Behind us, towards the boys' dorm, we could hear the sound of a woman singing, along with a drilling sound, *and it was getting louder*.

I grabbed Pomni, covering her mouth as I ducked us into a dark room. And I mean it was *dark*. I grabbed her night vision goggles and pulled them down over her eyes, before doing the same to the ones on my head.

It was *creepy* in here. It was filled with cribs and mannequins. Adult mannequins, infant mannequins... mannequins of all ages. Just awful, really.

Radio static buzzed from across the room. Look at us, finding the objective *totally on purpose*.

I guided Pomni under a crib. "Wait here, the radio thing is literally right there." I pointed out to her where it was.

"Be careful or I'm kicking your [BEEP].

"Maybe I'm into that kind of thing." I winked at her. "But fine."

I stood up and walked over to the radio. The moment I touched it and started fiddling with dials, it got louder. That seems like a flawed radio design.

Just as I finished, I heard that drilling sound enter the room. *"Naughty children have to see the doctor...", A woman's sing-songy voice rang from behind me.*

I turned to look at her. She looked like if an off-brand Mother Goose was thrown into a blender, with a goose puppet on her arm. Except, the goose had a *massive* drill for a mouth. Delightful.

I backed up and just stood as quietly as I could against the wall. It was dark enough that there was no way she could see me, but she *sure was* shuffling closer to me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Pomni slowly crawl out from under the crib, grab a nearby bottle, and she chucked it at the far end of the room, away from the exit.

The woman ran after it, saying all kinds of things, pretending to be the weird doctor goose guy. Pomni and I quickly and quietly made our way out of the room, and I shut the door behind us.

"Appreciate you getting me out of a very unwanted doctor's visit, Pom." I grabbed her hand and started going back to where we were given the objective. "Didja see how good I tuned that radio, though? Didn't even die."

She half laughed. "I'll watch you turn knobs any time."

"Pomni! Is that an innuendo I detect?" I was quickly distracted by a very obvious little loot box, which I tore open. "I'll turn your knobs *anytime*, Po-" I was cut off by the box emitting green gas into my face.

"Jax?!"

I didn't feel like I was choking or anything, but it *did* feel like my heart was going to pound out of my chest all of a sudden. "Pomni, do you *hear that*...?"

"Hear what?"

As I looked over at her, there was what looked like a man with a skull for a head and thin, branch-like tentacles for hair standing right behind her, gesturing like he was about to snap her neck.

I grabbed her as fast as I could and just booked it down the hallway, having zero idea where I was actually going.

"Jax!? What's going *on*?!"

"*It was going to hurt you.*" I muttered as I just continued to run. It was following us. I couldn't stop.

"Jax-" I couldn't make out the rest of what she said. My ears were ringing with the sound of horrific, dissonant screams.

She wiggled her way out of my arms and shoved me into a small closet thing, her following and shutting the doors. "Shh..." She shushed quietly, like she was trying to quiet a crying baby. Her hand clasped onto mine, *tightly*.

I did my best to stay quiet. Her thumb traced up and down my hand. "Shh..."

The sound of that goose lady was absolutely grating when layered with the awful screaming sounds in my ears that felt like they were being transmitted straight into my brain. But that goose woman was clearly right outside of our closet, and Pomni could *definitely* see her too.

We waited there for a minute, until the lady changed course for what sounded like Kinger off in the far distance. He was terrible at whispering. Pomni opened the closet door and stepped out. I couldn't move. Around the door as it opened, the skull man crawled around the door and jumped at me. I was so braced for death that I wasn't expecting to feel Pomni gently tugging at my hand. "Hey, come here." She put her other hand on mine. "It's safe."

I was shaking, and had zero control over it. "We're okay." She kept my hand firmly in hers and began rifling through a med kit that was sitting on a table. "Aha!"

She pulled out what looked like an inhaler with a big green bulb thing on the end. "I *really* need you to trust me for a second." Pulling me down to her level, she held the inhaler out in front of my mouth. "Open."

I reluctantly did what she said. She put part of the thing in my mouth and squeezed the green part. "Big breath."

Almost instantly, everything felt normal again. The skull guy was gone. The screaming stopped. "Are you alright?", was the only thing my brain to think to say to her.

She smiled. "I'm fine. Things feel normal again?" She rubbed my cheek.

I nuzzled into it. "Yeah. But what the [BEEP] was that?"

"Some hallucinogenic gas? At least that's what the thing that sprayed you said on it."

"Oh, well, at least it was conveniently labelled."

The objective updated above our heads. "Radios tuned: 3/3. Make your way to the shuttle." A loud alarm started going off.

She kissed my hand before gently pulling me towards the stairs. "You good to run? I feel like we should run."

Behind us, a big white door slid open, and the freaking goose lady stepped out, revving her doctor goose drill thing.

"Yep, running sounds good. Let's run." And we both did exactly that. Except, it didn't take long for Pomni to start falling behind me. I slowed down and grabbed her arm, swinging her onto my back. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and held on.

As I ran, I noticed a brick on the ground. Scooping it up as I ran by, I turned around and smacked this lady straight in the face with it. She stumbled, giving us a few seconds to get some distance, and I sprinted out the front door and towards the shuttle.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!" I shouted as we reached the shuttle. There was a little red button with a label that just said "Call shuttle?" I smacked that button, and I rapidly heard it approach.

"UH, JAX?!" I turned around, and the goose lady was heading towards us, along with a *really* big guy with a club. I guess that was the friend Pomni didn't want to make earlier.

"Do you have anything to throw?!"

"NO, DO YOU!?"

"*NO*."

I set Pomni down and stood in front of her. [BEEP].

Just as that lady held Mister Doctor Goose drill towards my face, the shuttle door opened, and Pomni tugged me through the door.

It was weirdly safe in here.

We were alone; no one else had made it here yet. I picked her back up and kissed her. "My hero." I teased. She smiled and giggled. GOD, it was cute.

Neither of us had noticed the countdown clock in the corner of the room. As it reached zero, the shuttle doors closed and we started moving.

"...Are we the only ones who made it...?" She whispered.

"I mean, I'm *really* fast." I nuzzled my face into her neck. "And maybe we make a decent team."

I could feel her heart beating faster in her chest. *Cute.* "Yeah... you might be right."

I sat in my room while everyone else was out in the main room playing cards or something. I had changed back into my new favorite sweatpants and a tank top, and *really* just wasn't in the mood to be around the others. Rags and Gangle were *insufferable* after horror adventures. They just talked about their *feelings* and experiences and were obnoxiously 'girl power' about it. It drove me insane.

Per usual, I couldn't get Pomni out of my head. Just thinking about her made me smile. She *cared* about me. And I had *never* cared about another person more than I care about her. I want to listen to her talk about herself for hours. I want to know every dumb little thing about her. What's her favorite color? Her favorite animal? Her favorite flower? What did she love most in the world? What movies did she like? What were her *dreams* before she got to this place?

I was startled out of my train of thought when I heard my *locked* door open. "What the f-"

There she was, just walking in like it was no big deal at all. "That was too much emotion for me, thanks."

I sat up on my bed, staring at her. "Don't take my surprise as me not being *thrilled* you wanted to see me instead of partaking in the emotional motivational speeches, but how did you even get in here? The door was locked."

She raised an eyebrow. "I've hung around you long enough to know how to open a locked door, Jax."

"I should be offended that you didn't knock, but I'm choosing to be welling with pride instead. What if I was getting dressed or something?!" I feigned disbelief, placing the back of my hand to my forehead and looking up, like a dramatic woman on TV.

"Maybe I *am* a pervert." She laughed and sat next to me on the bed. "But... I wanted to talk to you."

"What, you going to tell me I kiss bad, am ugly, and you actually hate me? That's cruel, Pom."

"You tell me." She reached up and pulled me partially on top of her, and kissed me. I'd never get over how her lips felt against mine. It felt so *right.* "Jax..." She whispered, barely pulling away from my lips.

"What am I to you...?"

Oh, God, I wanted *her* to answer this question first. Do I just take the shot, here?!

Yes. Kinger had *better* not be [BEEP]ing me, here.

"You want the honest answer, Pomni?" I whispered back to her. She nodded, clearly looking worried.

"You are *everything* to me, Pomni." I leaned back down into her lips, kissing her like my life depended on it. "You make me feel normal." I placed another desperate kiss on her lips. "You make the demons quiet..." Another kiss. "Even if you want just to stay friends... or... good acquaintances... You are irreplaceable to me."

She stared at me. Her face was red and hot, and her pupils were shaped like *literal* little hearts. Oh my god. *Oh my god*. That's the cutest [BEEP] I've ever seen.

"Do you mean that...?" She whispered, never breaking eye contact with me.

I inched a tiny bit closer to her. "Do you *really* think I could say any of that if I didn't mean it, Pomni?" I spoke as lowly as I could, trying to feign some level of being attractive.

"No." Her voice was barely audible. She pulled me as close to her as she could, kissing me with the most passion she had ever shown. I couldn't keep my hands off of her anymore. Without breaking the kiss, I grabbed her hips and pulled her up, sitting her on my lap. Being admittedly mortified of [BEEP]ing up here, that is where my hands stayed. No wandering hands, here. I'm a *gentleman*, [BEEP] it.

The kiss grew more and more desperate. I still had no idea what I was doing. She was fully in charge of advancing *anything* physical.

She gently pulled away from me. "For the record... I feel the same way."

"Mmm, you think I'm pretty?"

She smiled, possibly the biggest smile I'd ever seen her wear.

"Just kiss me, you idiot."

I smirked. "Yes, Ma'am."

Eleven is Too Many Creepy Dolls

The next day's adventure was way lower stakes. We had to solve a mystery of how some bratty 20-something-year-old girl just "disappeared" on a moving train. Except, the train was still moving and we weren't allowed to get off of it. Seemed like an ineffective method for detective work, but whatever. There was also some stuff about an old gold miner having some crazy train secrets or something? I dunno, the girl that disappeared talked a whoooooole lot before she vanished, I just wasn't listening.

Everyone was fiddling with something or other. Ragatha was trying to unscrew the vent covers without a screwdriver in the dining car, Kinger was staring out of a window in the sleeping car, claiming to have seen a ghost, and Gangle was messing with a puzzle box off in some side room. It felt like a moving escape room.

Pomni had shuffled off to a train car near the back. She was actually pretty good at stuff like this. I was just wandering around, looking at what kind of weird assets Caine thought belonged on a mystery train. There were an unholy amount of dolls laying around. Real creepy little things, too. One of 'em muttered the word "mama" in a really creepy, monotone way every time it was picked up. They looked exactly like the kind of dolls that would be in those paranormal museums.

I was totally going to try to freak Pomni out with these little [BEEP]ers.

I picked up every single one I found. There were eleven of them, which is exactly eleven too many creepy dolls. Thank god for magical infinite adventure inventory space.

"Poooomniiiii..." I called, waltzing into the last car I'd seen her in. Nope. She was gone. Dang it. There's only like, three train cars, how the heck could I have missed her?

"I'm back here!" She shouted from beyond a door at the end of the car. A door that had been thoroughly locked not that long ago.

"Weeeell, look at *you*, detective Pomni!" She was sat in front of a big dollhouse, just staring at it. I leaned down and kissed the top of her head before plopping down next to her. Peering around her, I could see that blonde NPC reading a book in the corner, looking as though nothing had happened. "So.... You found her?"

"Yeah-" Pomni started as I slowly started pulling one of the dolls out of my inventory bag. "-but I guess that isn't enough to actually *finish* the adventure? I think we have to finish all the puzzles on the train."

"Ma-ma."

Pomni nearly jumped out of her skin and shuffled her way over to me, pressing her back into me as she whipped her head around.

I wrapped my free arm around her and showed her the doll. "I was TRYING to just hide one of these behind you, but I had to go and pick the only one that talks out of the bag." I laughed. "Mission failed successfully, I guess."

She took the doll out of my hand and looked at it as if it had all of the secrets to the universe within it. She craned her neck back to look up at me. "Did this little spawn of Satan have friends?"

"I definitely did not take you as one to be into dilapidated kids' toys, Pomster."

She pointed at the dusty dollhouse. "We need 'em for that."

"Even the stupid *DOLLS* are a puzzle?"

"Jax, you shouldn't call them stupid, they might actually eat your soul." She held up the doll in her hands. "This, here? Soul muncher."

"Pfft..." I chuckled at her. "I'll munch *your* soul."

"What does that even mean?"

"This." I wrapped my other arm around her, effectively locking her in arm-jail, and started chewing on the base of her neck. Not enough to hurt, but definitely enough for her to be covered in spit when I was done.

She laughed and flailed around so hard that it was actually kind of a challenge to keep her in one place.

Oh my god, *she was ticklish.* This is the best knowledge I have ever learned.

I finally let up after it seemed like she was actually struggling to breathe, and gave her neck a little smooch. She laid there, finally being still within the confines of arm-jail, trying to catch her breath.

"Munched your soul." I whispered to her, grinning my [BEEP] off.

"You never answered my question." She managed to get out through what was left of the giggles.

Goooooood, she was cute.

I grabbed my bag and plopped it in her lap. "Ten more creepy [BEEP] dolls for ya, Darlin'."

She opened the bag and started pulling each one out. "Aww... Just what I always wanted. Pure, unfiltered evil."

"I mean, that's why you like me, hm?" I rested my cheek on the back of her head.

Without breaking her rhythm of taking each doll out of the bag, she responded, "You're not evil. Kind of an [BEEP]hole, yeah-"

"Rude."

"-but you're not evil. Like, yeah, you'd laugh if I slipped on a banana peel, but I'd laugh if you did too. Am I evil?"

"Yep." I pinched her cheeks a little. "Evil incarnate, right here."

"You're just a big ol' gooey cookie on the inside, but only I get to taste-" She went silent, realizing the absolutely hilarious innuendo she'd just created.

"Pfft..."

"Do not laugh."

I could feel the cataclysmic giggle fit that was forming in me. "Pom..." I had to stifle the laugh.

I failed.

My laughter absolutely filled the room as I rolled back and had to hold my stomach to keep my sides from hurting.

She was starting to smile, too. "Shut uuuuup."

"Cookie. Taste. You. My-" Was all I could manage through the painful laughter.

Her tone shifted into something softer. Deeper. "Well, am I *wrong...?*"

I'd never heard her speak like that, and it made my chest twist up into a tight ball. I stared at her as I pushed my giggles down in hopes of hearing it again.

She smirked. "That's what I thought." She slowly crawled over, resting her hand on my chest. That hand crept lower, and lower, as she leaned her face down to mine.

I could feel every degree of heat in my body move to my face. My heart ricocheted off my ribs, like it was trying to escape.

She smiled more softly as she came within an inch of my face. "That's for tickling me until I couldn't breathe." She whispered before roughly kissing my cheek and sitting back up.

I just laid there, flat against the ground, waiting for my heart to get itself together. Friggin' Pomni, with her feminine wiles or whatever... I didn't even know she had those.

I would figure out how to fluster her this badly without seeming like a horny creep *if it was the last thing I did*.

Pomni grabbed my hand and pulled. "Coooome on. Help me with this." I sat up, and she dragged me back to the dollhouse puzzle.

We sat there, arranging dolls, following the clues on some old piece of paper she'd found. It actually was mildly entertaining, even if Pomni was *way* better at it than me.

She placed the final doll down, and a drawer slid open. Inside was just a piece of paper that said "Good job, Sleuths!" With some condescending confetti. Pomni looked annoyed.

"What a disappointing reward..."

"Life is full of disappointments, Pom. *Buuuuut*, at least we got to be disappointed together, right?" I smiled at her in as obnoxious a way as I could manage on purpose.

She rolled her eyes at me before leaning over to kiss me. "I guess." Her smile made me feel like mush, and I just *knew* I must be grinning like an idiot.

The portal back to the Circus popped up in front of us, and Pomni quickly grabbed my hand and pulled me through, continuing towards the bedrooms without saying a word to me.

"Sooo... where we goin', Pretty Thing?" The goofy nickname just melted out of my mouth, and I didn't even care. No one else had found the portal yet, Zooble wasn't around, and *I* got to follow behind Pomni, and I gotta say, watching her walk away was *not* so bad.

She turned to look at me while we walked, and she was absolutely beaming.

Cuuuuuuuuuute.

"I want a boyfriend-level opinion on something."

Boyfriend?

That should be freaking me out, right?

Why wasn't I freaking out?

Because I wanted her to say it again.

I had to look like such a [BEEP]ing lovesick puppy, just letting her drag me behind her, cheesy grin on my face. "Does that mean I get to call you my girlfriend?"

Her pace slowed a bit as we approached her door. "Do you *want* to call me your girlfriend?" She asked quietly, unlocking her door.

"Well..." I opened her door and pulled her inside, kicking it closed behind us. Without thinking, I plopped myself on the ground and pulled her towards me, wrapping my arms around her waist. "I might be into that idea..."

She smiled as she leaned down and kissed me, her arms resting on my shoulders as I held her body as close to mine as I could. I would never, *ever* get tired of this. The taste of her lips. The smell of her skin. She was so perfect.

As she slowly pulled away, I made a split-second decision and bit at the base of her neck again, gnawing at it faster and faster as her laugh became more and more hysterical. Her laugh calmed my soul in a way I didn't think possible. Like my problems simply didn't exist if she was happy.

God, Kinger was right. This was so scary. But I never wanted it to end.

"*JAX!*" She managed between bouts of laughter. She started tapping on my back. "*YOU WIN!*"

I replaced the bites with a few little kisses. "I always win."

She wiped her neck with her hand and smeared my own spit back in my face. "Here's your prize!" I'd never seen her smile like this. *I made her smile like that...*

"Play stupid games, win stupid prizes, I guess." I stared up at her, stupid smile still on my face. "So, what, did you just bring me in here to seduce me or what?"

"Oh!" She kissed my forehead before walking over to her closet, starting to pull it open. "I... need your help."

I raised an eyebrow. "Wiiiitttthh....?"

She looked embarrassed. "I..." She gestured at the various drawers. "I don't know what looks good..."

"Are you asking me for *fashion advice*?"

"More... like... I want to look better... For you." She stared down at the floor.

"As *thrilled* as I am with being asked to dress you up however *I* want, you can wear whatever *you* want. I won't like you any less for wearing weird clown pants."

"But..." She looked so uncomfortable. "*I don't know what I like anymore...*" Her hands suddenly became very interesting to her, picking at her nails and generally just fidgeting. "I hate this body. So. So much. And I just... don't know how to make it better."

I sighed quietly and walked over to hug her. Her face just sank into my torso. "I am a lanky, purple rabbit, Pom. I get it." I leaned down to whisper in her ear, "For what it's worth, *I love your body.*"

She slowly looked me in the eyes, her skin nearly neon red.

"Look, I know I bull[BEEP] a lot, but not about this. You're absolutely beautiful, Pomni." She looked like a bomb and I'd just pulled the pin. "And you tell me when you feel differently. Because you're wrong, and I will tell you that you are wrong until you want to hit me." I could see the tears welling up in her eyes. "Nope! No tears. You're hot as [BEEP], and you just gotta get over it. Now come on, let's find a little outfit that makes you feel like that [BEEP], okay?"

She just nodded.

"If we find something you like, I'll let you dress me up toooo...." *That* got her attention. "You gotta show some enthusiasm, though! No sad sap will be dressing *me* up."

A little smile crept across her face. Nailed it.

We spent *way* too long digging through her clothes. I'd never seen so many flavors of "jester chic". We'd firmly decided that she liked my hoodie and the poofy pants she'd been wearing, so those were in the good pile. She'd also put a couple of things in the pile without showing me, and it was taking all of my power not to peek at what they were.

"What about this?" She walked into my view in loose-fitting, fabric-y overalls that were split red on my right, and blue on my left. The ankles cinched in, giving them that same poofy jester look the other pants did. There was a thin, yellow cloth belt tied around her waist, and honestly, it gave her the most "human" shape of anything she'd tried on.

Under the overalls was a cropped yellow t-shirt that was short enough that you could see her skin between the shirt and the overalls. *And I wanted to put my hands there so badly.* It was like the ultimate hand spot for me!

"You've been staring for *so long*, do you like it or hate it?"

"Mmm..." I followed my heart and put my hands on her bare-ish sides. "Yep. This one. Me likey this one."

Her hands pressed up against my lower chest. "Yeah, I thought you might like this one..."

"Do yoooooou like it?"

"Yeah, actually. I do."

"Overalls are super in right now, I'm sure you've heard."

She gently shoved me away, chuckling to herself. "I'm putting your hoodie back on, it's cozy time, not cute time."

"You'd be cute in a trash bag."

She laughed out loud. "Is that a compliment or a threat?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes."

She shook her head and started changing. I quickly turned around and sat on her bed. Nope. Not gettin' called a perv today. No sir. Though, I wasn't even sure she'd thought about it.

She yawned and climbed into my lap, now wearing my hoodie instead. *Just* my hoodie. It was long enough to nearly reach her knees, but it still made me feel some sort of way.

"Can we go to bed? Fashion shows are exhausting." She looked up at me with sleepy little puppy dog eyes that I was physically incapable of saying no to.

"You want me to stay?"

She nodded. "Yes, please."

I was surprised, even though I really shouldn't be. My sweatpants were literally sitting on the side of her bed. Right where I'd left them this morning.

"Then I guess I'm stayin'." I stood up with her still in my arms, walking over to the clothes-less part of the bed and tucked her into it. "You're lucky you're cute."

She sleepy-smiled at me.

I quickly put the clothes on her bed back in the closet, maintaining the [BEEP]y piles we'd made as best as I could, and changed into my sweatpants. I leaped into bed next to her, and she wasted no time closing the gap between us. She was such a cuddle bug when we were alone. And I *loved it*.

I kissed the top of her head and reached to turn off her light.

"Thank you for tolerating me." She muttered, already half asleep.

"I'll tolerate you day after day, Poms. So long as you tolerate *me*."

"So long as you're tolerable." She whispered as she wrapped her leg around mine.

"Good night, Pomni." I held her close to me.

"Mmmm...nigh-" she managed, before the final syllable was replaced by a little snore.

I normally spent my nights struggling to sleep. Completely unable to shut my brain off. But lying here, next to her... Watching her look so comfortable cuddled up to me... Brought me a level of peace I thought I'd lost a long time ago.

I'd find a way to thank her. Somehow.

Red or Blue?

I refuse to get out of this bed right now. Pomni's head was tucked into the crook of my neck, softly snoring away. Our legs were tangled together, my arm wrapped protectively around her. She was so warm. I'd really forgotten what the warmth of another person felt like. She was like a teddy bear, but prettier.

My perfect peace was interrupted by Pomni's quiet little groan in her sleep. I looked down at her, expecting her to be in her half-awake little stupor. But she wasn't. Sad little whimpers rapidly replaced her sweet snores. The beating of her heart against my chest grew faster and faster.

"Pom?" I whispered to her, as quietly as I could.

She didn't hear me.

"Hey..." I moved my hand to her cheek, rubbing it with my thumb, trying to get her attention. "Pom, you're dre-"

"JAX!" She shouted and shot up out of my arms, effectively head-butting me on her way up. Her shoulders shook as she caught her breath.

"Yes?" I smiled at her as I reached out and grabbed her hand, gently pulling her back to me. Relief washed over her face as she looked at me, holding my hand like I would never give it to her again if she let go. "So, what'd dream me do? Was he an [BEEP]hole? I'll kick his [BEEP]. I can take me."

I got a little half smile out of her. "No. Nothing like that." She exhaled a big breath and moved to cuddle on top of me so closely that it felt like she wanted to wear me as a fashionable coat. I wrapped both arms around her.

"Come on, talk to meeee..." I whispered to her. "You're clearly upset. What'd you dream about?" I kissed her cheek. "I'm willing to resort to torture."

She laughed silently. "It's nothing, I'm fine."

"I know when you're lyyyyying, *Pretty Thing...*" She'd never admit it, but I could tell she liked the dumb pet names, and I'd lay 'em on *thick* if it'd make her feel better.

"*Am not*." She muttered, her face buried in my neck.

"I'll do it. Tell the truth or face the consequence."

"*Noooooooooo...*" I could tell she was smiling by the way she said it. "*I'm okay*"

I flipped us over fast, her back hitting the bed with a muffled bounce. She gasped in surprise, and before she could even think to wriggle away, my knees straddled either side of her small

frame. I caught one wrist and pressed it down beside her head, then reached for the collar of her hoodie, pulling it just far enough to bare the curve of her shoulder, *the best method of torture*. I sink my teeth into it, and chew on her like a dog with a bone.

Laughter burst out of her, and I didn't let up. I pinned her other hand down and held her in place. Eventually, my playful nibbles gave way to a slow, deliberate scrape of teeth across her skin. Her laughter melted into quiet, shaky sighs as she tilted her head, exposing more of her throat for me. Willingly.

I pulled back, just enough to take in her whole face. Her lips were parted, her breath shallow, and even in the low light, I could see the heat coloring her cheeks. Her eyes locked onto mine, wide and desperate.

I leaned in and pressed my mouth to hers. Hard. She moaned into it, soft and needy, and I nearly lost all composure right there.

God, even if I was smooth as a Ken doll down there, *it sure didn't feel like it right now.*

I pushed my tongue past her lips, and she met me equally, like she'd been wanting this just as badly.

Her fingers flexed in my grip, not trying to escape, but seeking more. When I tightened my hold, she arched into it. She liked this. She *really* liked this.

Her kiss deepened, and I kissed her back like I knew what I was doing. Like I had *any* clue what I was doing.

I didn't.

My hands were still holding her wrists, mostly because I didn't trust them not to do something stupid if I let go. They ached to move. Down her sides, up under her hoodie, *somewhere*... but the thought alone made my stomach twist. What if I ruined everything by touching her wrong? What if I said the wrong thing? What if she noticed I had no idea what I was doing?

I pulled back, just for a second, my breath shaky. She looked up at me, dazed and flushed and beautiful in a way that made my chest feel like it was cracking open. Her lips were still parted, waiting, like she wasn't done yet.

"Pomni..." I whispered, barely getting her name out. It sounded stupid coming out of my mouth right now. Everything suddenly felt too loud. My heartbeat. My breathing. Her hands, now free, trailing up my arms and around my back.

"Hmm?" Her voice was soft and curious, not demanding. She wasn't rushing me. That helped. A little.

"I..." I swallowed hard. My tongue felt thick. "I don't... this isn't... like, I've never... done this."

“I kind of figured,” she whispered, smiling. Not mocking. Not judging. Just... Pomni. Still, *rude*.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and it made my heart skip. God, she knew me too well already. She didn’t just mean now. She meant *really* okay. Inside-my-own-head okay. Dating-a-girl-I-care-about-and-terrified-to-screw-it-up okay.

And I panicked.

“I mean... technically, yes,” I said, voice cracking on the ‘yes’ like a teenager asking someone to prom. “But also... this started because you had a nightmare and I was trying to make you laugh, so, like... how did we get here so fast?”

She blinked. “You’re saying this make-out session was... medical?”

“I was treating your emotional distress with certified comedic neck gnawing.” I gestured to myself. “Therapist Jax.”

“You're trying to deflect.”

“Hey, *you* deflected first.”

Pomni laughed softly, which only made it worse. Not because she was mocking me, but because she looked so stupidly beautiful when she laughed, and I was already spiraling.

I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly hyper-aware of how warm my face was. “This is just... new, okay? You’re my *girlfriend* and I’m really, really happy about that, but I’ve never done this before."

Her expression softened. She reached up and brushed her knuckles against my cheek. “You haven’t messed anything up.”

I looked at her, barely holding her gaze. “I just feel like I’m doing everything wrong.”

“You’re not.” She leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of my mouth. “You’re just doing it honestly.”

No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It was usually "[BEEP]hole", not "honest".

“I like you,” she said simply. “All of you. Even the part that’s nervous and awkward and makes dumb jokes when he’s scared.”

“I only make dumb jokes when I’m scared.” I smiled at her. "They're *great* when I'm not scared."

“Uh-huh.”

I let out a big breath. “Okay. Yeah. Alright. This is fine. I'm fine. *We’re fine*.”

“We’re great,” she corrected. “And we can slow down. Or stop. Or keep going. Whatever you need.”

I hesitated, then kissed her again. “I don’t wanna stop,” I murmured against her lips. “I just... needed to catch up to my own brain.”

She smiled and pulled me closer, wrapping her arms around my shoulders like she’d done it a thousand times before.

We didn’t rush. We didn’t race toward anything. We just stayed wrapped up in each other, moving slowly, kissing like it was something we were learning how to do together.

And God, it felt good to learn with her.

By breakfast time, I felt like a stupid, giggly mess. Her hair being messed up filled me with a weird sense of pride. She'd put on the overall-tshirt-outfit we'd picked out last night, and [BEEP] she looked cute.

Not to mention the subtle little marks on her neck.

They were light, someone would have to *really* be looking to see them... But *I* saw them. And it just made me want to add more.

She was nitpicking her outfit in the mirror while I got dressed. Nothing fancy, I'd found a pair of jeans that basically looked like my overalls but without the "overall" part, and a yellow tank top. *Pomni* seemed to be a fan, though. I'd caught her looking over at me in the mirror at least three times since she'd walked over there.

"Do I need a hat?" She asked, playing with her hair. "I feel like my hair looks stupid."

"Nah, I like your hair."

"But it looks *dumb*."

I walked over to her, crouching down to wrap my arms around her waist from behind. "At least you *have* hair. You're dating a stupid little fuzzy *bunny man*."

"Yeah, but I like your fur. It's soft and nice-"

"Stop, you'll make me blush." I interrupted.

"-mine looks like a weird nest."

I stared at her in the mirror for a moment. "Lemme do it." I stood up and walked over to her closet. There's an accessory bin *somewhere in here*...

"Huh?" She watched me as I rifled through her closet looking for that stupid bin. "You want to *do my hair?*"

I shrugged as I dug through the annoyingly well-hidden bin. "I mean, if you hate it so much."

"You know how to do *hair?"*

A-HA. Hair ties. Nice. "As well as anyone who's had longish hair can do hair, I guess."

I stared at me. "You had long hair?"

I twirled her back towards the mirror and started pulling her hair back, brushing through it with my fingers. "Yeah, for a dude, at least. It was like... collarbone length?"

"Mine looked pretty similar to how it does here. Not exactly a "trendy" person."

I started wrapping the long enough pieces of her hair into a stubby little high ponytail. "So, it was a tangled mess?"

"...Yeah, kinda."

When I finished, I'd managed to get all of the hair that was normally covered into the hair tie, with just the pieces that always hung out in the front still down. It was actually pretty darn acceptable, if I did say so myself. "Better?"

I looked in the mirror at her hair, then up at me. "I think I'm offended that you're better at ponytails than me."

"Yet another thing I *dominate* at, Pom."

She rolled her eyes and gently pushed me. "Yeah, uh-huh."

"I'm great at *so many things*, Pomni."

"I didn't disagree with you."

"Oh, but you did." I grabbed her and held her in an eye-level bear hug. "With your *eyes."*

She kissed me quickly before wiggling her way down. "Can you be great at getting breakfast? I'm hungry."

"I sure can." I nudged her a little. "See that? Great at taking requests."

She laughed. "You're insufferable."

I grabbed her hand as we walked out her door. "Why, thank you! I try."

She didn't let go of my hand once we were in the hall. So, I decided to go for something bold.

I didn't let go of hers, either.

I figured as we got closer to the main stage, she'd finally let go. But she never did. So, I didn't either.

As everyone came into view, it took every ounce of fortitude I had to maintain composure. *I* certainly wasn't embarrassed to be the one parading Pomni around, I mean, she was a [BEEP] *prize*. But I was so worried she'd be embarrassed of *me*. I would be fine being her dirty little secret. I understood. These were her *friends*. I was just a guy they barely tolerated. I never cared about what they all thought.

But suddenly, I cared *so much* about what they thought of me.

I could feel the stares being directed at us. At *her*. She didn't seem to mind at all.

We sat together, as we usually did, and ate our food. Pomni didn't seem to pick up on the weird vibes emanating from the entire room. Well... mostly Ragatha and Gangle. Kinger was pretty focused on me, but there was no malice there. It felt more like a wordless "atta-boy." Zooble didn't seem to care in the slightest.

"GOOOOOOOD MORNING, MY SOUPY LITTLE SPUDS!"

Oh god, yes, adventure, please make this awkward encounter *end*.

"I have *quite* a little adventure for you today! Straight from the suggestion box!"

"I'm not working service again." Zooble said flatly, not even looking up from the table.

"You're all going to the MALL!"

Gangle raised a... ribbon... hand... "Just... *going...? As in-"*

"A SHOPPING TRIP!" He clapped to himself. "You all have been given a *generous* spending limit, but whatever you purchase, you get to keep! Isn't that COOL?!"

Zooble actually looked up. "Kind of, yeah, actually." They squinted. "The malls not *weird*, right?"

Caine laughed. "You'll just have to see!"

He snapped, and through the portal we all barreled.

We had all ended up in the world's most normal-looking food court. Oh. He meant it. This was like. *An actual mall.* And a fairly nice one at that.

Pomni looked absolutely awe-stricken by something so simple. Her eyes were locked onto a pizza joint that closely resembled one that was in basically every mall I'd ever been in in my entire life.

Noted.

It took Ragatha almost no time to figure out what she wanted to do. "Come on, Pomni! Let's go look at the clothing stores!" Pom looked up at me.

I leaned down to whisper to her. "Go. Just meet me back here for food later. Yeah?"

She smiled and kissed my cheek, *in front of everyone*. "Wouldn't miss it."

I was trying so, so hard not to look like a raging idiot in front of everyone else, but it felt like a losing battle. This woman made me stupid. Purely, wholly stupid. And there was zero chance that wasn't abundantly clear by the smile on my face.

"She kissed you!" Kinger's voice rang from behind me. "At least, I think she did."

"Yeah... yeah, she did, Kinger." I ran my fingers over my cheek, as if I was trying to convince myself that it had happened, too. "Yeah..."

"Hey, where'd everybody go?"

Ugh. "We're in a mall, Kinger, they went shopping."

"Oh!" He thought to himself for a moment. "Should we be shopping?"

"Yeah. I guess." I mean... I *could* blow my "allowance" on dumb [BEEP]... But...

I wanted to get something for Pomni. I just had absolutely no idea what.

"Hey, Kinger?"

"Yes, Jax?"

"...Come with me."

"Okay!"

I dragged him behind me, desperately trying to find a bathroom. Or a closet. *Something*.

"Restrooms"

Bingo.

I yanked Kinger into the single-person bathroom, shutting the door behind us and flipping off the light. Almost pitch black. Probably weird. I didn't care.

"Kinger, I need your help."

God, I hated asking for help. But if I had to ask anyone, it might as well be the guy least likely to make it weirder than it already was.

He blinked into the dark, but his usual haze cleared in an instant. For once, his voice was grounded. "Of course. How can I help? Is this about Pomni?"

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. "Yeah. I wanna get her a present, but..."

Kinger let out a laugh. "Ah. I remember shopping for my wife. Anniversaries, birthdays, holidays... If there's one thing I learned, it's that overthinking it will drive you completely insane." He pointed to himself. "Take it from me. Certified lunatic."

I raised an eyebrow. “So I’m just supposed to guess? I want her to *actually* like it.”

“Not guess,” he said. “Think. What does she like?”

I hesitated. “We kinda skipped the whole ‘what-do-you-do-for-fun’ first date phase.”

He rubbed his non-existent chin. “Okay... then what have you noticed? What makes her smile? What does she pay attention to? What does she care about?”

I paused, really thinking.

And, unfortunately, the answer hit me like a brick.

Me.

But what the hell was I supposed to do with that? Wrap myself in a bow?

I mean, I was gift-worthy, obviously, but still.

The silence dragged long enough that Kinger seemed to catch on. His voice softened. “You’ll know it when you see it. You always will.”

Then he moved to the door. “But you won’t see anything in a dark bathroom.”

With a dramatic flair, he flipped on the light and walked out.

I followed, grumbling under my breath.

“Real helpful, Kingy.”

We walked down the main walkway. This mall was ridiculous, in the best way.

There was a functioning escalator, music playing softly through unseen speakers, fake plants in shiny pots, and a pretzel stand pumping out warm, buttery lies. I was fully expecting to turn a corner and see some cursed clown animatronic or something, but nope. This place was *eerily* normal.

I wandered past a novelty sock store, some place that only sold glitter-covered hats, and a kiosk pushing perfume with names like “Moon Tears” and “Inner Violence.” None of it screamed Pomni.

Not that I knew what would. [BEEP], I'm already a bad boyfriend.

I was about ready to give up and default to “horribly overpriced food court dessert” when I passed a tiny jewelry cart tucked between two stores.

Silver and gold bits glinted in the overhead lights. Necklaces. Rings. Little charms. Most of it was tacky junk. But then my eyes landed on a thin bracelet.

Delicate chain. A couple of charm hooks. Simple. Light. Not flashy.

And hanging right beside it, one tiny silver rabbit charm.

I froze.

A rabbit. Me.

I stared at it for probably too long, already imagining the way she might turn it over in her hands, or hook her fingers through the chain while she talked. Something about it felt... right.

I paid with whatever nonsense currency we were using and held the bracelet in my hand like it might break if I squeezed too hard.

It wasn't grand. It wasn't flashy. It wasn't perfect.

But I did it. I bought her a thing.

...And also lost Kinger.

...

Eh, he'd be fine.

I took the opportunity to *actually* look at stuff I'd want at the mall. I still had dumb fake money left, and as long as I had enough to get Pomni lunch, I was good. I didn't have rent to pay.

I was browsing through some weird little movie store, and every single title was a knock-off. Hilarious, but nothing worth dragging back with me.

Through the storefront window, I spotted Ragatha and Pomni. They were weighed down with shopping bags. *Way* more than the single tiny pouch I had in my pocket. Guess *they* were having a good time...

I slipped out of the store and made my way over. Without saying a word, I grabbed all of Pomni's bags out of her hands.

"WHAT TH- Oh!" She lit up when she saw me, genuinely delighted. That was still... new. And jarring. And really, really nice. "You don't have to carry those! Seriously, it's fine."

"Shut *uuup*. I'm carrying 'em." I smirked. "These are my bags now."

She smiled and hooked her hand around my arm.

"What'd you get? Anything naaaaaughty?" I nudged her with my hip.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Yes. Yes, I very much did.

Her attention drifted toward Ragatha. The two of them were having some kind of silent conversation. Eyes locked, eyebrows twitching... weird.

Then, Ragatha suddenly spoke up, way too loudly. “OH! UH. I’m gonna go see what KINGER is up to!” She shot Pomni a look, whispered something to her, and practically sprinted away. “Have fun!”

I raised an eyebrow. “What the [BEEP] did I just witness?”

Pomni blinked innocently. “What?”

“Are you two telepathic or something?" I smirked. "Talking [BEEP] about me right in front of me?”

“Yep. Totally.”

We kept walking. As we passed a little stand with a slushy machine, I caught Pomni’s eyes lingering on it. Without saying a word, I stopped and ordered one of each flavor: cherry and blue raspberry.

She looked up at me with those stupidly powerful puppy dog eyes. God. Kinger might’ve been right. Maybe this *was* easier than I thought.

The mannequin vendor handed them over, and I awkwardly shifted the shopping bags to one arm so I could hold both slushies.

“Red or blue?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“Which do you want? I like both. You get dibs.”

She hesitated for half a second. “Red,” she said softly, reaching for it. “Cherry’s almost always my favorite.”

She took a sip, and her eyes went wide. “Oh my god, it actually tastes right.”

“You’re [BEEP]ing me.” I sipped the blue one. My eyes widened too. “Oh my god...”

“Thank you, Caine,” I muttered dramatically, “for your one singular act of mercy.”

I steered us toward the pizza joint she’d been eyeing earlier. She lit up again, clearly impressed that I’d “guessed” what she wanted to eat.

Halfway through her massive slice, she glanced at me. “So? What’d you get up to? Didn’t find anything you liked?”

“Nah.” I instinctively checked my pocket to make sure the bracelet was still there. *Later*, I told myself. “Turns out Kinger’s a huge fan of sparkly hats, though.”

She snorted a laugh, mouth full of cheese.

I kicked my legs out under the table until my foot tapped hers. “Would’ve rather seen you in a dumb sparkly hat.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Would I get to see you in one?”

“Pom,” I said, deadly serious, “if I wore one of those hats, I’d look like a furry stripper.”

She immediately choked on her pizza.

I laughed so hard I nearly dropped my slushy.

After we’d completely destroyed our slices and slushies, we just... sat there for a bit. Her hand holding mine from across the table, a goofy little smile on her face.

It was peaceful. Which was always suspicious.

Eventually, the portal back to the Circus opened up nearby. “Ugh...” I muttered.

She stood up, stretched with a yawn that somehow managed to be cute and smug at the same time, and grabbed one of the bags I’d been carrying.

“Nope.” I snagged it back. “Still my bags.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue.

We stepped through the portal together, landing back in the hallway outside our rooms. Nice. She opened the door to her room, holding it open for me.

“Hey, thanks for carrying all that around.” She chimed as I set her bags on the ground.

I shrugged. “Was just trying to impress you with my raw upper-body strength.” She laughed, dragging most of the bags over to her closet. I guess she *did* buy clothes...

“Hey...” I started, trying to figure out how to not be awkward. “C’mere.”

I sat down on her bed, barely having to wait before she plopped down next to me.

“What’s up?” she asked, tilting her head.

I took a breath and grabbed her hand. My heart was doing that fast, stupid thing again. I pulled the little pouch from my pocket and set it in her palm. “I, uh... here.”

She stared down at it. “What is-”

“Just open it,” I cut in.

She loosened the drawstring and let the bracelet slide into her hand.

“Jax...”

“I saw it and thought it was... cute?” My voice cracked. Great. “Like... how could you not want a little reminder of *me* on your wrist?”

Yep. There it was. I had officially ruined it.

“Help me put it on,” she said immediately, holding it out.

I nodded and took it back, fiddling with the clasp like I had claws for hands. “How do you people do this by yourselves?” I muttered.

She giggled but didn’t answer, just waited patiently while I finally got the bracelet around her wrist. Once it clicked in place, she stared at it like it meant something huge.

“I love it,” she said, before launching herself at me, arms flinging around my neck in the tightest hug I’d ever received.

I kissed her cheek a few times, barely keeping up. “Maybe I do like you or whatever. Could’ve started a weird niche stripping career with one of those dumb hats instead, but nope.”

She laughed. “This makes what I got you seem so dumb.”

“Wait, what?”

Pomni pulled away and crossed the room to grab one of her shopping bags, the one she hadn’t taken to the closet. She walked back over and dropped it beside me.

“It’s dumb,” she said again, fidgeting. “Don’t judge me.”

“...Do I get to open it?”

She nodded.

I peeked inside.

And immediately lost it.

“Oh my [BEEP]ing god.”

“I told you.”

I yanked it out of the bag: a Furby stuffed animal. A messed-up, sad-eyed, dead-souled Furby... except this one looked suspiciously like Pomni.

“Pomni,” I wheezed. “How the [BEEP] did you find this absolute masterpiece?!”

She started laughing too. “Okay, listen. There was this place where you could make your own stuffed animals, and they had some seriously janky ones, right? So I find the Furby one, and I’m like, ‘Oh, Jax would love-hate this.’ I give it to the NPC to stuff, and when they hand it back, it looked like someone *taxidermied* me into this thing.”

Tears were rolling down my cheeks. I held the thing against my chest like it was sacred. “This is the greatest thing I have ever received in my entire life.”

“I told you it was dumb!”

“Dumb?! Pomni, you might get *replaced* by this thing.” I dropped the Furby on the bed and grabbed her hands, yanking her on top of me in a squish-hug that turned into a full-body roll.

She shrieked with laughter as I rolled her back and forth on the bed, holding her like *she* was the stuffed animal.

“I love it,” I covered her face in wet, annoying kisses, before reaching her lips.

She was still giggling against my mouth, soft and breathless.

I kissed her again.

And again.

I didn't know what else to say to her. But, god, I didn't want her to ever move again.

Accident Means He Means It

I loved watching Pomni during adventures. At least, adventures she didn't absolutely despise. We were trying to climb the world's weirdest mountain. Except, it was like a mountain on top of a mountain on top of a mountain... With a volcano on top. Very Caine-core.

We'd made it to a weird desert part of this multi-biome mountain, the rest of the group lagging behind Pomni and me. We were significantly better at stuff like this than everyone else. "Do you think this cactus fruit will poison me?" Pomni asked me, tossing the large fruit back and forth between her hands. "Apparently, I'm too hungry to have decent stamina."

I shrugged. "I dunno, try it. We have an antidote if it *does* poison you."

She didn't hesitate and took a bite of the fruit. "AHHGGH, OW," she yelled as she pawed at her mouth. There were a bunch of cactus spines sticking out around her mouth. "WHY CAN'T I PULL THESE OUT?!"

I grabbed her chin in one hand and gently started pulling them all out myself. "The same reason that you have a literal stamina bar; Circus logic." I'd already had a bad experience with a hot pepper in a jungle biome, and I felt slightly vindicated that I wasn't the only one who'd gotten screwed over by food. After pulling out the last spine, I laid a quick kiss on her. "Better?"

"Much better, *thank you*." Her voice had a sing-songy cadence to it, that made my heart feel like it was going to fly away.

"You patted me out when I was on literal fire, it's the least I can do."

"Uhhh... Hey, Jax?"

I was too lost in looking at her pretty eyes to hear the loud noise getting closer to me. "Hmmmmm?"

"We gotta go." She grabbed my hand and pulled. "Like, now."

I followed her eyes to look towards whatever she'd been staring at behind me. "Oh, sh-!"

A giant, cartoonish tornado had spawned behind me, and wasted zero time picking me up, ripping Pomni's hand out of mine.

"JAX!?"

"GO ON WITHOUT MEEE...." I yelled to her, hoping the humor in the situation would at least sort of land for her. Probably not, but worth a shot.

The tornado threw me a decent ways back, and *straight* into a giant patch of cactuses. There I lay, upside down, stuck to a giant [BEEP]ing cactus. Well, this couldn't be worse.

Until I heard *high-pitched giggling*.

"This is a good look for you." The snark in Zooble's voice made me want to toss their limbs off of the [BEEP]ing cliff. Gangle couldn't stop quietly laughing at me.

Kinger was next to make me want to die here on this cactus. "Have you always been so upside down?"

"Where's Pomni?" Ragatha asked, pretty flatly.

I vaguely pointed, as well as I could, because you know, I was stuck to a [BEEP]ing cactus. "That-a-way. I'd *love* to show you if one of you would *get me down*."

They all stared for a second.

"Nah." Zooble mumbled before walking off, Gangle and Kinger following behind them without question.

Ragatha lagged behind for a moment. "I- uh... Good luck... with that..." Her words would have felt weirdly genuine if she wasn't just *LEAVING ME HERE*.

They were gone.

Cool.

Okay, Jax. Time to figure out how to get un-stuck from a cartoon cactus. Maybe if I just... pull one limb off at a time... ow... I'll eventually just...

I fell.

Into a new, lower-down cactus. Ow.

"Jax?" ... "Jax!" Pomni didn't hesitate at all to walk through a few smaller cactuses to come pull me out. "I thought you were dead!"

I couldn't even put my arms down there were so many spines sticking out of my body. "I kind of wish I was."

Her hands moved quickly but carefully to pull them all out. "At least only I had to see you look like a rabbit hedgehog?" She half laughed.

"Uh-huh."

The tone in her voice changed. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Jax."

I stayed silent for a second. "...Something."

"Okay... what kind of something."

"Nothing."

"Jax, come on, talk to me!" She continued pulling out spines. "What's wrong?"

"Other than being humiliated by a cactus?"

"I don't think the cactus is making fun of you."

"Yeah, *it's* not."

"Hey, I'm not either!"

I just quietly stood there as she pulled out the last of the spines.

Pomni held my hands, trying to lay on those stupid, cute puppy eyes. "Taaaalk to meeee..."

She was SO lucky that I thought she was adorable. "You weren't the first one to find me." I grumbled, trying not to look at her.

I wasn't used to having someone to *talk to*. At least, someone I *wanted* to talk to. And I did want to. I just... was very bad at it.

But Pomni was patient. *Persistent*, but patient.

"Who...?" She half whispered.

I sarcastically laughed. "More like who *didn't*."

Pomni sat, staring at me for a minute, wearing a face I simply could not read. Her eyebrows were gently furrowed. Shoulders tense. "Come on. Let's finish this [BEEP]ing adventure." Oh, now *that* was a tone I could identify. She was *mad*.

As she dragged me behind her, my hand firmly squished into her tiny death grip, she didn't say a single word.

Did I do the whole "sharing my feelings" thing *really* wrong? Should I be apologizing? I shouldn't apologize if I don't know why I'm apologizing; she'd hate that more...

[BEEP.]

She didn’t slow down, not even when the sandy red dust of the desert ended abruptly at a sheer cliff face that went straight up into the blazing sky. The thing had to be four, maybe five stories high. Sun-baked rock stacked like a giant, uneven wall.

The rest of the group was still nowhere in sight. Not that I *wanted* to look at them right now. It was just me, Pomni, and the kind of obstacle you only see when Caine decides “fun” means “probably fatal.”

I stared at it. “...You think it'd kill Caine to add some stairs? An escalator, maybe...?"

Pomni was already halfway to finding her first foothold. “Come on.”

Is this what the proverbial doghouse was like?

Her grip earlier had been tight, but now it was laser-focused. She went first, every single time, always waiting for me at the top. A few times, I had run out of stamina and started to slide, but her hand was always there, fast, gripping my wrist like she’d never even considered letting me fall.

Being tall was really a hindrance for this. The number of times I smacked my head on low-hanging, hot rocks was rapidly approaching double digits.

“You want a helmet, Jax?” she asked, hauling herself to the next ledge.

“Yes, actually, I hear it's a vital piece of equipment for the safety of mountain-climbers.”

“Too bad.” She was so focused, she didn’t even toss me a smirk. That more than anything told me she wasn’t in her usual teasing mood. She at least usually thought I was a *little* funny...

The heat rolling off the rocks made my fingers sweat, and I almost lost my grip until Pomni anchored her foot against a crevice, bracing herself so I could push off her shoulder for leverage.

“...This is not a very dignified position for me,” I muttered.

“Eh, I still think you look cute.”

She was really sending me some mixed signals here.

The higher we climbed, the biome slowly changed. The dust of the desert was gone, replaced by dark, brittle ground. The volcano loomed above, close enough now that faint, sulfur-scented heat washed over us. By the time we scrambled over the edge, my arms felt like overcooked noodles.

We stepped onto a wide plateau of volcanic rock, the air shimmering in waves. Ahead, the base of the volcano was littered with jagged, charcoal-colored columns.

"Ugh..." We both groaned.

We both made our way over to the base of the volcano, hopping column to column over a literal lake of lava. It would have been pretty bad[BEEP] if my girlfriend weren't angrier looking than the literal fire mountain.

We walked through a tunnel towards the center of the volcano, her fingers intertwined with mine as we walked across the first piece of flat land we'd seen in what felt like a million years.

The heat hit instantly as we walked in. It was thick and suffocating. I didn't even like *normal* heat, this *sucked*. Beneath us, an ominous glow lit the cracks in the ground.

“Uh...” I pointed at the orange light that was rapidly getting brighter on the floor. “Is the floor supposed to look... molten?”

Pomni glanced down. “I'm going to say... no.”

We started climbing, and fast. The slope was steep, the rock brittle, and the air felt like it was trying to bake us alive. Every few seconds, a vent of steam hissed up beside us, and I had to fight the urge to just lay down and accept my fate as a fine roasted rabbit.

About halfway up, we spotted it - a brown suitcase wedged between two rocks, right in our path. What a dumb place for luggage.

Pomni frowned. “Do we... check it?”

“It could be helpful,” I said. “Like supplies, or... water.”

I popped the latches and opened it. Inside was a neat, almost polite arrangement of bright red sticks wired together, with a very lit bunch of wicks at the top.

We both froze.

“...So. Not water,” I said.

The wicks were getting shorter.

Pomni didn’t yell; she just grabbed the suitcase and threw it down into the lava. It tumbled end over end before vanishing under the fiery surface. A half-second later, a cartoonishly huge explosion came from beneath us, not splashing so much as a drop of lava. Just a big puff of smoke.

We stared for a beat.

“...Fairly sure that’s not how dynamite works,” I muttered.

“Come on, we have some more "up" to go.”

Yes, ma'am, no argument here.

We climbed the rest of the way with the lava chasing us like it had a personal grudge. Pomni stayed ahead but kept looking over her shoulder, making sure I was still with her. Whenever the ground crumbled under my feet, her hand was there before I could slip.

By the time we reached the crater rim, the lava was a pulsing, liquid ocean below, licking at the edges of the slope. At the very top sat the “goal” of the adventure.

It literally just looked like a holographic finish line.

We crossed it together, the volcano’s roar cut off, the heat vanished, and the world blinked out.

Back at the Circus, everyone was complaining about the dumb ways they all died, which explains why we'd all come back at once. I heard mentions of falling, poison, explosions, scorpions... Good, glad they had the time they deserved.

Pomni didn't even look at anyone; she just dragged me back to the bedrooms, our usual post-adventure routine, but this felt... different.

She pulled me into her room, tugging me down so she could give me a kiss.

Again, mixed signals. Not complaining, though.

She smiled and rubbed my cheek. "Go lay down, that was... exhausting." The smile dropped from her face. "I'll be right back." Her tone shifted from caring to murder *real* quick.

I nodded. "Noooo problem..." I was not about to tell her no to *anything* right now. I'd be staying on the 'gets kisses' side of her mood, thanks.

She left as I sat on her bed, closing her door behind her *much* harder than she normally did. *Yikes*.

It felt like almost no time had passed at all before her door flew back open and Pomni stormed in, slamming it shut before just staring at it without turning around.

"Soo... what just-?"

I noticed her shoulders gently shaking with her fists balled to her sides.

[BEEP].

I sat up, swinging my feet over the edge of her bed. "Pom..."

She broke down.

I pulled her towards me, hugging her. "Hey, I'm here..." I sat her in my lap so I could see her face, which was wearing nearly every emotion all at once. She was bawling... but she still looked *livid*. "What the [BEEP] happened?"

She rubbed her eyes. "If I tell you, you have to promise to not get mad."

Well, that's an awful start.

"I promise to *try* not to get mad."

She looked like she was going to argue, but gave up before she even began. "Fine... I'm just... Angry."

"Poms, not gonna lie, this doesn't look like my definition of angry."

"I'm kind of an angry crier, okay? Sorry."

"No, no apologizing, that's not what I meant. This just looks more... complicated than angry."

She leaned into me, resting all of her body weight against my torso. "It is."

"Look, I know I'm awful at this stuff, but you have to give me a fighting chance here." She laughed a little at my self-deprecating not-joke. "What's going on in that big ol' head?"

"First, rude." She started playing with my hand. "Second... Ugh. I was mad they all just left you on the cactus..."

"Wait, really? I mean, yeah, it was [BEEP]ty of them, but I would've done the same thing to any of them."

"But it was *all* of them." She was clearly still irritated. "So... I went to like... just tell them that was uncool and leave it at that, but..."

"Buuuuuut...."

"This is the part that's going to make you mad."

"Hey, I promised to try not to be mad."

She sighed. "They gave me [BEEP] about us."

I kissed her head. "Who cares what they think?"

She sat quietly for a moment. "It doesn't change how I feel about you. At all. But..."

"You care what they think." I held her closer.

"I mean... kind of... yeah. They kept saying you were just going to hurt me..."

That struck a nerve with me. "Well, I definitely don't *intend* to."

"And I definitely don't think you would *ever* do that to me intentionally. But..." She looked down, twisting her fingers together like she was trying to hold herself together. “...But they kept pushing it, saying I was being reckless with you, that I should... keep you at a distance. And I just...” Her voice cracked. “I don't believe them...”

I forced myself to keep my jaw tight and my voice calm in front of her. Calm. Pomni needed calm. “Pom... don’t worry about them. They’re idiots.”

"It felt like I was a stupid teenager getting lectured by their parents for dating a "bad guy"." The 'angry' part was really showing now. "I'm an adult. I can make my own [BEEP]ing choices about *my* dating life. About *you*."

I kissed her temple. "You are. I still think you have awful taste in men, but I'm *your* mistake to make."

She smiled. "I don't think you're a mistake."

"I have *loads* of time to screw up, Poms." I kissed her forehead. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to go be *not at all mad* for a moment."

"Jax... Don't."

"I promise to not be violent. Unless someone else starts it, then it's fair game."

Moving her off my lap, I gave her one final kiss before heading to her door.

"Be nice."

I waved at her as I started walking out. "*I'm always nice.*"

She loudly sighed as I closed her door.

The moment I knew I was out of view, the seething rage took over me. I didn't care what they said about me, I really didn't. But *how dare they* use me to upset *her*.

I stormed down the hall, fists clenched, chest tight. By the time I made it to everyone, they were just casually sitting around on the couches, and that [BEEP]ed me off even more.

“Don’t you dare treat her like some idiot kid making a bad decision. Her personal life is *not* your responsibility, she’s not your problem, and if you ever-” They were all staring at me. "If you... I... She..."

My voice hit a crack, my heart beating out of my chest and before I could stop it, the words slipped out, raw and unplanned: “...I love her.”

Immediately, the room went eerily silent.

[BEEP].

Zooble’s head snapped up. “What?”

Gangle’s eyes were huge, ribbon across her mouth.

Ragatha blinked, tilting her head. “You *love her*?”

I froze mid-step, a hand flying to my mouth. “...Shut up! I didn’t- no, I didn’t mean to-”

Zooble snorted, “I didn't think he was even capable...”

Gangle looked *so* excited. "Do you mean it???"

"Do you think I'd *lie* about that?!"

Ragatha smiled, leaning against her hand. "Does *she* know this yet?"

I groaned, cheeks burning, fists balling and unclenching in frustration. My carefully built anger at them? Completely tangled now with humiliation.

"I... don't know? This is the first time I've said it out loud." Why was I spilling my guts to these three?

Ragatha's smirk didn't fade. "Fair enough. But seriously... 'I love her'? You didn't even mean to say it?"

"...No," I muttered, glaring at the floor, muttering to myself. "...Definitely didn't mean to say it. Accident."

Zooble just looked at Ragatha. "Accident means that he means it."

"Aww!" Gangle cooed. Ugh.

"*Not a [BEEP]ing word to Pomni about this.*"

Zooble half-heartedly saluted. "You got it, lover-boy."

"And stop [BEEP] talking me to her. Unless I deserve it, I guess? But believe it or not, I'm actually trying, here."

"You've made your point." Ragatha laughed.

My anger at them was still there, but now it was buried under a whole new layer of embarrassment. They were being *nice* to me now?! I spun around and stormed back toward Pomni's room. I'm confused, kind of humiliated, and just want to bury myself in bed with her.

I slowly opened her door, and she was still sitting right where I left her. "Is... everything okay?"

I walked in and just laid on top of her, nestling my face into the crook of her neck. "Yep."

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